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IN TWO VOLUMES.

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JAMES PAYN,

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THE WORD AND THE WILL.

CHAPTER I.

MR. JOSEPH ADDERLY.

THE world is slow to recognise excellence on a small scale, and the name of Natchett-on-Sea may touch an answering chord in but few breasts, yet it is a very picturesque little place, nevertheless, and is called (by those who have property in the neighbourhood, and would like to let it on building leases) "the Scarborough of the West." It is like Scarborough, but looked at through the wrong end of a telescope. It has a Spa, but without the palatial residences surrounding it with which the rank and fashion of the east coast is so familiar, and Spa Gardens of a duodecimo size; it has also

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a Castle in ruins, and with even less of it left; it has a bay, or a "cove that thinks itself a bay"; and a mile or two away a Flamborough Head, in Hendon Point, with a very respectable colony of sea-gulls. If it were within a hundred miles of the Metropolis people would rave about it, and many a lovely marine resort fast growing into public favour would find its nose put out of joint; but (which does not always happen among kith and kin) if it was nearer it would be dearer, a circumstance which would have prevented a good many persons in our *dramatis personæ* making it their place of residence.

As matters stand, Natchett, being both out of the way and un-get-at-able, is by no means a fashionable spot; but, on the other hand, it is—well, do not let us say cheap, but "suitable to persons of small means." Hither come genteel families, to what they call "retrench"; though the fact is, few of them have cause to reproach themselves with past extravagance, their object being to make their slender purses stretch as far as possible without the strain being remarked upon; widows and families of

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professional men and officers on half-pay, whose incomes, or the larger part of them, have expired with them, the bread-winner—or at least the bread-and-butter winner—having died in harness and left the end and aim of his labours but half accomplished. It is what happens everywhere and every day; yet it is a sad spectacle. The mothers in houses in which they cannot take the old pride, forced to leave the neighbourhood of their old friends, to "cut and contrive"—nay, even to "pinch and pare"; the girls to be "buried alive," and lose all their "chances," as they are called. To the philosopher, of course, this "coming down in the world" is a mere nothing, but, then, poor ladies are rarely philosophers. That "crown of sorrows," the "remembering happier things," is always with them.

Where the Scarborough of the West differs most, perhaps, from its more famous namesake, is in the almost total absence of the male element. Except the fishermen, the parson, and the doctor—for there is not enough wealth in the place to keep a lawyer—there are absolutely no men in Natchett. If it

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were a city in America (and "city" it would no doubt be if it were there located), it would be admirably adapted for a Mormon settlement—an idea, however, which we may be sure has never so much as crossed the Natchett mind, which is highly proper, and for the most part the reverse of humorous. There are no "carriage people" in the place, but (not to lose the interest of readers in the best circles at starting) there are several in the neighbourhood. In Natchett itself there is but a single fly; a "fly on the wheel" is a metaphor for insignificance, but a fly on four wheels, when it is the only one in a locality, is a very different matter. On the rare occasion of an evening party—for there is no dinner-giving in Natchett—this one was exceedingly in request, and in wet weather could name its own price up to three shillings. In such a case no guest could be ever punctual, but either came late, as the engagements of the vehicle permitted, or early. It was not thought "bad form" to come before your time; as to driving round and round, outside, in order to avoid it, as is sometimes done

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in town, it would have been an outrage upon the rest of the company.

There was what is now called "a general consensus of opinion" (*vice* "it was agreed," superseded) that any *contretemps* or inconvenience caused by a deficiency of means should be ignored in Natchett. There was no competition in hospitalities. The evening refreshments were confined to sandwiches and sherry, with aërated waters, with the addition of negus in winter-time. If there was rivalry, it was in the aërated waters only, and had no reference to expense. Sherbet, and other curious drinks affected by teetotalers, were sometimes introduced as "something very highly spoken of." Had any hostess provided cold chicken, tongue, or made the least pretence of a supper, far less a sitting-down one, she would have been ostracized. "The common-sense of most" held lavish natures (if, indeed, any existed in Natchett) in awe.

An excellent example of this wise economy was offered by one of the few persons who could have afforded such superfluities, in the person of Mr.

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Joseph Adderly, of The Hall. His mansion was situated at some distance from the village, yet in a manner overshadowed it. Himself and his doings were the chief topics of conversation; and, indeed, they were peculiar. He was a rich man, even in the sense in which wealth is spoken of in other places, and very ostentatious, but he was a miser. He had built the Adderly Free Library at Halsworth, the county town; he had erected the Adderly Public Fountain in its High Street; and both of them had the fact recorded on their foreheads. It was whispered that it was his intention to erect and endow an Adderly University, with a statue of its founder (let us hope not "in his habit as he lived," for that was a reach-me-down shooting-jacket) in its principal court; but, for all that, as we have said, he was a miser. If his kitchen chimney ever smoked to any unusual extent, it was because something was the matter with the flues. He gave no entertainments; he distributed no alms; and declined to assist all religious movements "upon principle." If he had been a poor man he would no doubt have been described

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as an atheist; but being what he was, he had only "unfortunate scruples about religion." Perhaps it was so; but they were certainly so far fortunate that they gave him an excuse for not spending his money on it. He was rather a nice-looking old man, when he was pleased, though it was difficult to "catch him" (as the photographers say) in that attitude, for it was a rare one. He was tall, though very spare; had good features, except for his thin lips; beautiful white hair like spun glass, and looked as if butter would not melt in his mouth, which, indeed, it seldom did; in his food (unless he was dining out) he was an ascetic, though with no notion of fitting himself thereby for Paradise, and took dry toast with his tea.

About this unromantic and exceedingly well-preserved object there hung as much mysterious interest for the good folks of Natchett as though he had been a mediæval saint; only it was not with his past that they associated him—concerning *that* he gave them the amplest information: how he had started in life not even with the proverbial half-

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crown, but with eighteen-pence, and by the exercise of all the virtues that were worth speaking about—diligence, devotion to business, and economy—had built up a colossal fortune. What they wanted to look into was its future application; and about that, save for some hints dropped in the ears of certain highly-placed individuals who concerned themselves with the subject, as regarded the Adderly University *in futuro,* he was exceedingly reticent.

If he had a weakness, it was to find himself appreciated by the county families in his neighbourhood, who, notwithstanding his public munificence, fought rather shy of Mr. Adderly. Having despised from his youth up all accomplishments of a social nature, and having little to talk about beyond his wealth and his virtues, he could hardly be called an acquisition to general society. If he could have screwed up his courage to be hospitable, he might have made some way, but this was as much beyond his powers as to be amusing; he failed in any sense to entertain. He would subscribe neither to the hounds nor to the volunteers. To the county

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hospital he had subscribed, and largely, but upon the distinct understanding that its largest ward should be called the "Adderly Ward." "Confound the fellow!" Mr. Collins, M.F.H., had said of him; "I believe he would have given the Hunt ten pounds a year if we had named a puppy after him. I don't know what he made his money in, but I should think it was as an advertisement poster."

It was very well for Mr. Collins, upon his high horse, to thus regard Mr. Adderly, but society in the village looked at him from quite another point of view. They were equally aware that nothing could be got out of him while he lived, but they looked forward to his "cutting up" with the most lively expectations. Would he, or would he not, they wondered, at the last moment, when he could no longer grasp his gold and hardly his pen, bequeath any of his hoarded wealth to his two nieces, Martha and Mary Vance? These two young ladies lived on very small means indeed at Prospect Cottage, a name, though they had no hand in christening it, which was the subject of many a local jest—or,

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rather, which suggested many repetitions of the same one. Their uncle had told them many times, not, of course, in answer to any inquiries, but out of the fulness of his heart (though it was really his liver), and from his innate pleasure in telling disagreeable truths, that he would never leave them sixpence beyond what would realize the income they now possessed; and when he gave utterance to a threat, Mr. Adderly was always found to be a man of his word. Still, he did supplement their scanty means by the sum of one hundred pounds a year, paid quarterly, and referred to it on every occasion when he came across them. "It's a hundred a year more than anyone ever gave *me* in my life," he would say; "and I should like to know what I get out of it? You, Miss Martha, are a flatterer, and *that* don't go down with Joseph Adderly; your smooth words don't give me one morsel" (he called it "mossel") "of pleasure; and as to Mary, she don't hate me as you do, because she hasn't the spirit for it, but she is as afeard of me as Old Scratch. Flattery and Fright, that is what I've sunk £2,000

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in at five per cent., and it's the worst investment I ever made."

There was some humour (though he didn't know it), and also some truth, in this statement; but it was not a pretty one to make to two unprotected girls, the children of his dead sister, and the only kith and kin he had in the world. Martha Vance was three-and-twenty, and her sister a year younger; and both of them, as to appearance, calculated to excite tenderness in the breasts of most men; but Uncle Adderly was superior to that emotion! Moreover, whenever he looked at them (but especially at Mary, who "took after" her mother), he was reminded of the sister for whom he had at one time entertained the nearest approach to affection he had ever felt for any human being, but who had left the home he had offered her to marry a popinjay. So it was Mr. Adderly's custom to describe his late brother-in-law; though why a captain in the army, because he had no means beside his pay, should have been thus designated, it was hard to say. The marriage sundered the brother and sister; nor even

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when the Captain fell in action did Mr. Adderly forgive the widow. In the forlorn hope that the ties of blood would induce their uncle to look favourably on her children, she had brought them, when she herself was nearing death's door, to Natchett, whence she departed in a few months without having had speech with him. Even the letter she wrote to him on her deathbed he tore up without reading. "I know what she wants," he said, "and *I* want no palaver." In response, however, to her appeal, or perhaps from the suspicion that "the county" would have its views, if he did nothing for the orphans, he set apart £2,000, the interest of which they were to enjoy, on good behaviour, during his lifetime, and the principal after his decease. "And not one penny more of my money will you girls ever see," he had told them, in his harsh, grating voice, again and again, as though the words had been put in a phonograph, and it had been his pleasure to grind them out from that delightful instrument.

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CHAPTER II.

THE VANCES AND THE WALDRONS.

MARTHA VANCE would have been called pretty had she been seen, which seldom happened, apart from her sister. She had fine brown hair, and plenty of it; delicate and well-formed features; and blue eyes which, if a little cold, were bright enough. Her lips were rather thin, and were generally pressed tightly together, a circumstance which detracted from the temptation to press them with another pair. It suggested a certain hardness of disposition. It was this defect in them, perhaps, which helped to make her attempts to conciliate Uncle Adderly fruitless. They smiled, as the Scotchman confessed he joked, with difficulty; nor indeed was it to be wondered at, for there was little in her circumstances to create a smile. To the ordinary observer she was philosophic; no one but Mary ever

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heard her complain; but she secretly resented her poverty, and entertained very bitter thoughts against the relative who, rolling in wealth that he used for no other purpose, save in his freaks of egostistic munificence, kept them so scant of means. Like most persons not much inclined to making friends, she had a high idea of the claims of kinship, and honestly believed that had she been in her uncle's place she would have behaved with generosity.

Almost the only thing about which she and her sister differed was the conduct of Mr. Adderly. She thought it infamous and abominable. Mary did not think it liberal; but in her gentle heart found excuses for him, which, however, only fed the flame of the other's wrath.

"He is naturally fond of money," Mary would say, "which of itself renders generosity impossible; and since he disliked dear papa, and quarrelled with dear mamma, he might have declined to help us at all. It might have been very hard and mean of him, but, of course, we had no legal right to anything, and he *has* given us a hundred a year."

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Nothwithstanding which charitable view of him, Mary shrank from her uncle much more than Martha did; his coarse and cruel words hurt her as though they were cuts of a whip; his sneers at her father filled her with unspeakable indignation; his reiterated statements that they need not expect another penny-piece from him were shocking to her, not on account of their menace—for she did not look for another penny-piece—but from their brutality. Her health was delicate, her nature sensitive; she was no more able to cope with him than a lily with a broomstick; she drooped before his frowning brow and bitter tongue. The reflection that afforded no little satisfaction to her sister, "This man is old, and the world will soon be rid of him," gave her no comfort. On the contrary, it caused her to suffer anew, and upon his account. The thought of him heaping up treasure against the Last Day, on the edge of the grave, without a voice to bless him, or even a hand to take his own in friendship, was terrible to her. He knew that she feared him; but the last thing that was likely to enter Mr. Adderly's

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mind was that his niece Mary pitied him; but nevertheless it was so. Some people thought she was wanting in spirit; but if spirit meant detestation of her relative, Martha had enough of it for two.

Her uncle was quite aware of the fact, and it did not disturb him one whit; it even gave a zest to the contemptuous enjoyment with which he received her efforts at conciliation: he agreed with the cynic who tells us that everyone must be either feared or loved by his fellow-creatures, and that to be the former is much the more preferable. Yet in his heart of hearts he resented Mary's fear of him. It was too easy a victory for one so masterful. She was so gentle and harmless that there was no more satisfaction in treading upon her than in crushing a snail. He felt no remorse in doing it; it never struck him that a day might come in which he would have given all he had in the world in exchange for the memory of one kind word to her; but he took less pleasure in snarling at her than at other people.

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She was very beautiful, but it had been a good many years since Mr. Adderly had been moved by beauty; there had been a time, if the gossip of Natchett was to be trusted, when he had not been impervious to it. Cupid's dart had, to use the Scripture phrase, "struck through to his liver" when it had been in a less unhealthy state; but there had been neither romance nor sentiment in it—only disgrace, with meanness added. No; Mary's beauty was nought to him. Her soft gray pleading eyes, her brown hair, more abundant even than her sister's—a gift, indeed, whose amplitude is too often associated with delicate health; her gentle smile; her soft low voice, so excellent a thing in woman; her slight but graceful figure—these were mere ciphers to him, items of no value. The expression that her whole countenance conveyed was spiritual, and, so far as he noticed it at all, he disliked it. Some people likened her to a saint, and if there was one thing which irritated Mr. Adderly more than another, it was persons in that line of business. He regarded them with the malevolence with which

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a gargoyle on a spout looks on "the prophets blazoned on the pane."

Though Prospect Cottage was but a very humble residence, it really had a prospect; it was not like those lodging-houses at more popular marine resorts which call themselves Sea View or Belle Vue, upon the strength of a strip of blue only to be seen sideways, or out of a bedroom window. It stood in a little garden-plot of its own, sheltered from the north and east, but fronting what Natchett proudly termed the Atlantic. There was rather a doubt about this —though, except on rare occasions, it was not, at any rate, the Pacific—and cynical strangers called it the Bristol Channel. It was, however, a splendid view, and to Mary's eyes compensated for a great deal. She loved it in sunshine, and not less in storm, provided that she knew the little fishing fleet was safely in harbour, and that her friends the Waldrons had no anxieties about their dear George. Just now that gentleman was on the briny deep, on his return from India, and any "sea disturbance" was to be deprecated. Not,

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however, that that term had been hitherto invented.

The date of our story is long before the era of "storm cones" and "weather forecasts"; it is the year after the Indian Mutiny, in the quelling of which George Waldron, though a civilian, had greatly distinguished himself. He had escaped from many perils, literally of fire and sword, but until she had him folded in her arms, his mother could not believe that he was preserved to her. She was no coward, for cowardice did not run in the Waldron blood, but the intensity of her love made her fear lest, having survived such amazing dangers, he might fall a victim to that insatiate hunger of the sea with which those who dwelt at Natchett were only too well acquainted. She shuddered in her bed at Castle Crag as she heard deep calling to deep in angry tones, and every foam-tipped wave that struck the rock on which her cottage stood seemed to have a knell in it. Her dwelling was midway on the steep on which towered the ruins of the old Castle, and commanded a still wider expanse than that of the Vances.

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From Castle Crag, the ruin from which it took its name looks grander on its far-reaching promontory than from any other vantage-ground. Next comes the noble sweep of Natchett Bay, with the red-roofed houses of the village peeping out from its leafy shore; and then Hendon Head, steep and sheer, with its Jut, as it is called: the long low line of rocks, which even on the calmest day is fringed with foam, and when the south-westers blow is lost in clouds of spume—a sight to be remembered. It is fortunate that the tiny drawing-room of The Crag has so magnificent an outlook, for one of its usual inmates, Hester, Mrs. Waldron's younger daughter, is what is termed in the more genteel circles of her acquaintances "a confirmed invalid," and in others "unable to get about." She has some incurable spinal malady, which confines her to her couch, where she lies, however, save when her fits of pain are on her, the brightest and cheeriest girl in Natchett. As a weight in mechanics is sometimes the source of levitation, so, though herself so heavy a burthen upon the scant resources of the house-

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hold; her presence lifted its load of care, and even banished (save on her own account) its forebodings. "An everlasting bonfire light" would have been a description perhaps a little too strong for her, but she always seemed to be celebrating some joyful occasion, with combinations of fun and fancy. Old Mr. Gray, the village doctor, whose visits to her were as frequent as though he had been paid for them, once observed that if she could but have stood "bottling" she would have made a better tonic than any in the Pharmacopœia, to which she laughingly replied that he had done his best to get her out "of the wood." It was the only joke she had ever made to him which the old fellow had not welcomed with "deep-chested mirth," but there was too much truth in it for laughter; he knew that to get Hetty Waldron "out of the wood" was beyond human skill.

The prodigality of Nature is never more conspicuous than when she dowers with her choicest gifts those who are unable to use them. To have said that Hetty's life was a wasted one because she

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had a wasted body, and was doomed to be carried from room to room by the hands of others till she should be borne to her grave, would certainly not have been true; but it was sadly marred by incompleteness. She never murmured at her own lot, but it was impossible to keep from her keen wits all knowledge of the daily sacrifices that had to be made for her, and the consciousness of them at times was so intolerable that, like the patriarch of old, she would wish she had never been born.

Curiously enough, all the really handsome and expensive things at The Crag, as the cottage was called for short, belonged to this penniless and crippled girl. In the little lobby on which the front door opened, and which it would have required an expansive mind indeed to regard as a "hall," stood the counterpart of Hetty's spring couch in the parlour—for only Hetty called it the drawing-room, "because," she said, like another Alice in Wonderland, "we draw there"—except that it had a hood and went on wheels. Notwithstanding its brass fittings, it moved lightly, and enabled its in-

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mate to take the air without fatigue or pain; it was a mistake, she said, to suppose there were no "carriage people" in Natchett, when she took her walking-drives abroad. There were "musical instruments and that of all sorts" about the house—some of them quite rare, and adapted for the use of one who could only play them in a reclining posture—and beautifully bound books, very light in the hand. All these, too, were Hetty's, and were the gifts of her brother George. There was also a charming little piano, over which source of harmony there had been the nearest approach to a quarrel that had ever taken place between Mrs. Waldron and her son.

"We take half your income for our needs," she wrote to him in protest, upon the arrival from London of that instrument (carriage paid); "you are like the pelican (save that she was a fable) who fed her young with her heart's blood, in your generous kindness to us at home. I accept everything that is needful, and even comfortable, with thankfulness, not only to your dear self, but to Heaven for hav-

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ing given me so good a son. I cannot even find it in my heart to regret the luxuries you bestow upon our darling Hetty; but superfluities for ourselves I will not accept even from your hand. She cannot, alas! play on the piano, and Maggie can get on very well without one. There is no excuse for such wasteful munificence. Moreover, since you never think of yourself, it is a mother's duty to think for you. I try to believe that with your simple tastes and self-denying habits you may have, as you tell me, 'really more money than you can spend;' but this self-sacrifice of yours cannot, nay *should* not, go on for ever. It is high time—we shall drink your health (in your own wine) a few weeks hence on the occasion of your seven-and-twentieth birthday—that you should think of settling in life. That you will ever find a wife worthy of you it will be hard to persuade your mother; but a wife and a good one I hope you will soon find, and you are not the man to 'marry money.' Then you will want what you have for yourself, and though you will never regret what you have done for us, because it has

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made so much of what would have been hard for us easy, you will have reason to deplore what you must not think it ungracious in me to call unnecessary extravagance, such as the gift that arrived to-day.

"Maggie entirely agrees with me in this matter, as she will tell you; for of course we are all writing to wish you 'happy returns.' We want, please, to return the piano. We have not the heart to stay your gracious hand, whatever may be in it, for Hetty; but Maggie and I are able-bodied, and have no excuse for being spoilt."

To this her son George replied, with the duplicity that did him infinitely more credit than the plain truth, which some people "feel it their duty to speak," that the egotism of his sister Maggie was intolerable. The piano, it was true, had been directed to her, because it was for her use, but it was intended for Hetty's enjoyment. The circumstance of Maggie being a skilful performer on that instrument, and passionately fond of it, had doubtless misled her into supposing it was meant for her;

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but let her no longer lay that flattering unction to her soul: it was Hetty's piano.

This shocking falsehood deceived no one; but, of course, succeeded in its intent. The instrument was retained, and delighted two recipients instead of one.

"Please to play me something, Maggie, on my piano," Hetty used to say with the pronounced tone of a proprietress. "I don't complain of the matter," she wrote to George, in her humorous way; "but I can't help remarking that Maggie often plays airs upon my piano that are not *my* airs. There is nothing objectionable in them (I hope I need not say), but they are John's airs."

"John" was John Dennet, barrister-at-law, who had recently become engaged to Maggie. The cynical phrase, "His intentions were honourable, but remote," was unhappily applicable to him, though in no cynical sense; their engagement, indeed, promised to be such a long one that there appeared no end to it. His little income only just sufficed to keep him, and a third of a clerk, in an attic in

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the Temple. From that elevation he looked around for briefs, and looked in vain.

Maggie, like the rest of the family, had a brave heart, and, like her mother, maintained her soul in patience. There were times when Hetty was alone, in which, like some fragile butterfly between two panes of glass, she beat her wings against the narrow cage in which her life was passed, and would that it were ended! But Maggie never murmured against her lot. When things went harder with her than usual—the news from John, notwithstanding his attempts to veil it, more depressing as regarded that *rara avis,* the solicitor—she would go forth among the wives and children of the fisher-folk and try to make things easier for *them;* it is a course much more recommended than practised, but she found the advantage of it.

She had none of the delicate beauty of her sister, or the spiritual grace of her friend and neighbour, Mary Vance; but there were people in Natchett who thought Margaret Waldron more like an angel even than John Dennet did. She was, in-

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deed, rather too plump to square with our cultured notions of those heavenly bodies, and, so far from emulating their airy attire, she went about in wet weather in clumped boots and a waterproof. She was undeniably good-looking, however; she had bright hazel eyes, a fine colour, with a good deal of brown in it that spoke more of health than a sun-shade; and a smile upon her rosy lips that had gladdened many an aching heart, and lighted up many a desolate home. She was said to resemble in feature the brother she adored; but in disposition she took most after her mother. She had the same calm resolution and independence of character, the same kindness of heart, and even, it was said, the same reticence as regarded her own feelings; but though she had inherited her mother's good sense, the doubtful gift of an excessive sensibility had been spared, or denied, to her.

No one suspected, indeed, that the widow herself possessed it. Her patient resignation and dutiful self-restraint, and still more the practical wisdom with which she managed her home affairs, concealed

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from the world the memories and regrets which haunted that tender heart. The keen and loving eyes of Hetty alone knew of their existence, and even she was ignorant of their nature. Concerning them the widow made no complaint. When she spoke of her dead husband, it was always as her children's father, and with no relation to herself; but her thoughts were with him almost as much as when he had been alive. He had lost his life by an accident while comparatively a young man, and she (though very comely still; indeed, the gray in her hair enhanced her mature grace like the first snow upon the fell) had become an old woman; yet he seemed to love her as of old. His faults were all forgotten, including even the culpable imprudence which had prevented him from making due provision for his dear ones; his virtues were kept in constant remembrance.

No one guessed the real reason which had made the widow choose Natchett for her dwelling-place; that it was cheap and healthy no doubt contributed to its selection; but it had, above all, been the spot

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where she had spent her summer honeymoon near thirty years ago. Outwardly she was far from emotional, but Mary Vance had noticed more than once in their walks together the tears rise to Mrs. Waldron's eyes as she gazed on the cliff or the bay, in their sunlit splendour, and wondered that the beauties of nature should so move her. Whereas it was not earth, nor sea, nor sky that melted her heart, but the thought of "the touch of a vanished hand, and the sound of a voice that was still."

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CHAPTER III.

THE ARRIVAL.

One morning in early June the little family at The Crag were sitting together (though one, alas! was reclining) in the parlour as usual, but with a certain air of expectancy upon them. Hetty's pale cheeks were flushed, and though the hand with which she was making a little sketch of the Castle upon a small square of cardboard was steady enough, it was not so sedulous as it was wont to be. Ever and anon it paused, and she would steal a glance at her mother and sister. Mrs. Waldron was knitting with great assiduity. "For hours would she knit, would she not?" was a quotation Hetty had, not without reason, applied to her; but to-day she was literally knitting "against time"—*i.e.*, in order to pass it. Maggie was immersed in figures, the result of the week's expenditure, for

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she was auditor of the family accounts—yet not so deeply but that she, too, would occasionally look up and listen to "the water lapping on the crag," for no other sound came through the open window. Then suddenly the front door bell rang—that is to say, there was a tinkle quite close to everybody, as happens in a play on a very limited stage, and, as in a play, it had an instantaneous effect on all who heard it. The widow dropped her knitting, needles and all. Hetty would have dropped her cardboard had it been possible; it had no distance to fall, but she let go of it. Maggie dropped her pen, and for the first time disgraced the family ledger (price one penny) by a blot. Then there came a soft rap at the parlour-door, and in walked Mary Vance.

"Oh dear! oh dear! I am afraid I have disappointed you," she said repentantly.

"Not at all, my dear," replied Mrs. Waldron kindly.

"Well said, mamma," cried Hetty approvingly. "The duties of hospitality before everything, even Truth itself. We thought you were George, Mary."

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"But George—I mean, Mr. Waldron—cannot possibly be here before three o'clock, when the coach arrives," pleaded the visitor. "It is only twelve o'clock, and I looked in thus early on purpose not to be in the way when he did come."

"That is just like you, Mary!" exclaimed Maggie, embracing her friend affectionately. "It was very foolish of us to be so dis——I mean, so deceived."

"Having shown the poor girl that she was an intruder, you are now accusing her of duplicity," observed Hetty gravely. "Never mind, Mary, take off your bonnet and come and sit by me. There is one person in this house who is still glad to see you."

"How can you be so silly, Hetty?" exclaimed Mrs. Waldron, smiling. "Mary knows she is always welcome here, whenever she comes—though, indeed, that could be said of her in every house in Natchett."

"Well, you see, she is the only possible heiress there is in the place," pursued Hetty remorselessly.

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"No one knows—though everybody tries to guess—how Mr. Adderly will leave his money, and Mary may get it, after all. How *is* your good, kind uncle, my dear? When our carriages passed in the street yesterday, he struck me as not looking quite himself."

"Was he smiling?" inquired Maggie roguishly.

"Now, girls, I will not have Mary made uncomfortable," exclaimed Mrs. Waldron; and, indeed, that young lady was looking somewhat distressed, as she always did when Mr. Adderly was talked about, or, which was the same thing, alluded to disrespectfully.

"I beg your pardon," said the invalid; then, as the injured person leant down to kiss her in all good faith, she added innocently: "The fact is, I was mistaking you, my dear, for somebody else again, and thought you were Martha."

"You are a naughty, wicked girl," said Mary; and, indeed, it was a rather cruel speech, since Martha's detestation of her uncle was a very sore

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subject with her sister. But Hetty could never moderate the sharpness of her tongue.

Dr. Gray once observed that she reminded him of Heine, of whose physical ailments he had probably read more than of his poems.

"I wish my verses did," replied Hetty. "The editor of the *Chronicle*"—the county paper—"won't have them at any price."

"But I saw some only last week in its Poet's Corner signed 'H. W.'"

"I don't say he doesn't print them, but only that he doesn't pay for them," complained Hetty.

She wrote and painted, not contemptibly indeed, but still not very well. She pretended to no inspiration in either art, and, to say truth, was instigated to attempt them by what persons of culture denounce as the lowest motives: the desire to make a little money that she might eke out her mother's scanty income. She had hitherto had but little success. She had realized half a guinea for a poem in a literary competition in a periodical which had the cleverness to describe as prizes the very

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moderate remuneration it offered to its contributors generally, and fifteen shillings for a pair of hand-screens worked for a fancy bazaar. The last, however, was for a charity. The half-guinea was a *bonâ-fide* contribution to the family exchequer, and it had its place (though she little guessed it) in a little compartment in her mother's desk, along with a packet of faded letters and the first lock that had been cut from George's head.

"Yes, I am very naughty, I know," said Hetty, cuddling Mary's willing hand in her delicate palms, and looking like a penitent who has nevertheless good hope in the kindness of her priest; "but this is positively my last day of transgression. When George comes home we shall be on our best behaviour. The last time you saw him, by-the-bye, he writes, you threw a snowball at him. He never sees a snowball without thinking of you."

"Oh, Hetty, what nonsense!"

"Fact, I do assure you. Isn't it, mother?"

"Well, you see, it is ten years since George was with us," said Mrs. Waldron, smiling, "and you were

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quite a little girl, Mary. As he has been in India ever since, and never even taken a holiday to the hills, he has probably not seen a snowball since; but he never forgets, dear fellow! anything, however slight, that happened at home."

"Nor forgives," observed the invalid gravely.

"Now, I really won't stand that, even in joke!" cried Maggie. "If George, as a boy, ever was angry with anybody—which he certainly never was with Mary—it never lasted a minute."

"I didn't say that his temper was not short," observed Hetty; "but only that his memory was long."

"If you talk like that," said Mary, laughing, "I shall not dare to come and see you again for a month."

"Very good. If you are not here to-morrow, it is certain he will come and see *you*."

Here the bell tinkled again, and this time it was accompanied by a noise of wheels. Maggie ran excitedly into the lobby, and Mrs. Waldron,

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with a white face and tear-bedimmed eyes, followed her.

"Alas! I cannot go to welcome him," cried Hetty piteously.

All her fun and frolic had died a sudden death. Her mocking spirit was cast out of her, and in its place was a blank despair. Her delicate features wore an expression of bitterness as well as of pain; her very soul seemed to be protesting against Fate.

Mary regarded her with heartfelt pity mixed with awe, while her trembling fingers busied themselves with her bonnet-strings.

"Do not leave me," whispered Hetty, in such pleading tones as the other had never heard her use before. "Let him see that his crippled sister has a friend who never forgets her."

To this appeal there could be only one response; but poor Mary felt exquisitely uncomfortable. She had come to The Crag at that early hour especially to avoid being in the way when George Waldron should arrive; and that he had done so hours before he was expected was certain.

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The sounds of welcome and caressing, mixed with the dull thud of portmanteaus, came through the open door. They only lasted a few seconds, but to both girls, though for different reasons, it seemed an age.

Then hastily entered a young fellow, slight and of medium height, with a pleasant face browned by the sun, and a radiant smile upon it.

So monopolized was his mind by the sight of his sick sister, or so quickly did Mary fly to the window, that he was not aware of the visitor's presence. She sat with eyes averted from the pair and fixed on the sea, but she could not be unaware of some things that were taking place. Without a moment's hesitation the newcomer had fallen on his knees beside Hetty's couch; it had seemed to him, no doubt, the most suitable and convenient position for embracing her, and very natural, but to Mary's eyes it symbolized a touching devotion. Then tears were shed, perhaps by both parties—though, if by Hetty only, it was a circumstance amazing enough, for though others had wept for her, she was never

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known to weep—and two broken voices made gentle murmur together. What was said Mary knew not, save that they were speaking the language of love. She shut her ears to it, and strove to think of other things; but for the first time the glorious prospect before her—the time-worn Castle and the waves no time can wear, the white-winged gulls that flecked both sky and sea, the red-sailed fishing boats that sought the little harbour, and were unloading on the quay amidst the cheerful sounds of voice and tackle which accompany that proceeding—had no attractions for her. Her thoughts, notwithstanding all efforts to the contrary, would recur to that kneeling figure by Hetty's side. She had not seen him since she was a child, but had heard much of him. She knew that, although no soldier, he was as brave a man as ever drew sword; that he had been praised as such by one whom all India acknowledged to be its hero; that at a time of extreme peril and despair, in a place cut off from succour, and surrounded by an immense body of mutineers, he had, without even authority to back him, placed himself at the

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head of affairs, improvised a plan of defence, and, after prodigies of valour not surpassed even by the handful of British soldiers who at last relieved them, had preserved the lives of a score of his fellow-countrymen with their wives and children. For an instant only had she beheld his face: a bright and pleasant one, yet significant, too, of the strength of character he must possess; but it seemed to her now, should she never see it again, that she should never forget it. There was a likeness in it to her recollection of him as a boy—for, though high-spirited and fond of adventure, he had always been gentle and forbearing—but the gentleness into which its expression had developed was something altogether different from its early look.

To her view it had something chivalrous in it, such as might have been seen in one of King Arthur's knights; and, knowing how gallant a knight he had proved himself to be, the thought of him on his knees by his sister's couch was one that filled Mary's heart with an admiration for him little short of reverence.

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It was Martha's way to decry the present—to say that the days of chivalry had departed; that men had no worship now except for gold. Poverty and the ignoring of her claims by him she sometimes described as her "own flesh and blood," but at others in very different language, had embittered her. She had become sceptical, cynical, suspicious; Mary did not blame her, but only deplored it. Here was a man of whose generosity and courage at least even Martha could have no doubt, and who had now proved himself as tender as true.

"So you are Mary, are you—if I may still call you Mary?" said a pleasant voice close beside her. And as she rose hurriedly from her seat a thin brown hand sought hers, and grasped it cordially.

"Yes, that's Mary, the girl that threw the snowball at you when you left for India!" exclaimed Hetty from her couch.

"To be sure; she threw it after me for luck, and thanks to her, no doubt, I *have* been lucky."

"Then you *are* going to marry the Begum, are

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you? I was afraid it was off," cried the invalid cheerfully.

"Hetty is just as volatile and impudent as ever," observed her brother, smiling. "I am afraid you spoil her, Mary."

"Indeed I do not, Mr. Waldron."

"George, if you please, or I shall think you are not glad to see me," he answered gently. "Perhaps I have no right to suppose my old friends in England have such strong recollections of me as I have of them. They have had other things to think of which I have not had. But in your case I have heard so much of your kindness to Hetty that it is impossible to feel like a stranger to you."

"Artful creature!" murmured the invalid. "'A certain polite hypocrisy,' says the historian, 'is the characteristic of the natives of India,' and it is too often adopted by the settlers."

"Very good. I have letters, my dear, in my possession," said the young fellow grimly, "which describe the facts as I have stated them, and also give some lively descriptions of Natchett and its in-

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habitants. I will show them to Mary, not only in corroboration of my word, but because I am sure they will afford her much amusement."

"If you *dare!*" cried Hetty menacingly.

Her letters had been humorous enough, but it was possible that some of them, which had certainly "made hay" of Mr. Adderly, and had not even spared Martha herself, would not have proved amusing to Mary.

George laughed aloud.

"That is the best music we have heard at The Crag these ten years!" exclaimed his mother as she entered the room, where she had purposely left him for awhile with his sister, and once more flung her arms about his neck.

"Well, I don't mind," sighed Hetty. "Music is not my strong point, but I do think that mamma's observation is a little hard upon our pianist, poor Maggie!"

"It is much harder on her and on all of you," said Mary, "that I should have intruded on you at

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such a time as this. Pray forgive me, dear Mrs. Waldron."

"There is really nothing to forgive, my dear," answered the widow, embracing her; then she added a little inconsistently, "how could you have guessed that George would have been so extravagant as to take post-horses from Halsworth instead of waiting for the mail?"

"I am more than ever glad that I did it," observed the young fellow gallantly, as he accompanied their visitor to the door.

"I don't think I ever saw dear Mary looking so pretty," observed Mrs. Waldron. "There are some girls so happily constituted that confusion and even alarm seem to become them."

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CHAPTER IV.

THE VICAR.

NATCHETT had probably very little in common with Athens—and certainly not Greek, for Mr. Harden, the vicar, was the only person in the place who knew a word of it—but they were alike in this, that the inhabitants of both towns were passionately fond of news, and always seeking "some new thing" to talk about. In the smaller of the two seaports it was more seldom found, and, therefore, the more highly prized. When Mary Vance left the door of The Crag, she knew that her society would have seemed invaluable to everybody in the village, as being the only person, except the members of his family (and the post-boy, who, coming from a region fifteen miles away, was unaware of his immense attraction), who had seen and spoken with the Indian hero. She might have made Mrs. Maitland, K.C.G.,

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as Hetty had dubbed her (Knight Commander of the Gossips)—a lady who, if the noblest study of mankind is man be a true dogma, must have been a most cultured person indeed—happy with a word as she met her at the foot of the hill.

"Well, and how are you, Miss Mary? But I need not ask, for I never saw you with so fine a colour! I believe all that Dr. Gray tells about your delicacy is a mere conspiracy between you two, to enhance your value to us."

"Thank you, I am very well, Mrs. Maitland, but in a great hurry to get home, lest I should be late for dinner." And, with smile and a nod, Mary pursued her way.

The old lady shook her head, displeased at being robbed of a confab. "That girl's colour is *too* high," she murmured; "she has no business to pant like that from a run down hill; when I was her age *I* never panted." Mrs. Maitland was now, however, very fat and wheezy—doing her best to restore the average in that way. "It my opinion Mary Vance is running down hill in quite another sense. It is a

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pity it isn't her sister instead, for we could better spare her. My word! if Mr. Harden has not stopped her in spite of her hurry; I wonder if he has really any serious intentions about Mary, or, indeed, about anybody. He looks to me like a girl in boy's clothes."

Though a somewhat irreverent remark to pass upon one's vicar, it was by no means an inappropriate description of the Rev. Æneas Harden's personal appearance. He was tall as a Maypole, and as bald, but his whiskerless face and delicate complexion gave him an expression of extreme youth, with which the simplicity of his character well accorded. He looked particularly like a young lady whenever, as on the present occasion, he ventured to address one, and was troubled with a hesitation of speech which arose more from moral than physical causes.

Those were very superficial observers, however, who, like Mrs. Maitland, set down Æneas Harden as a milksop. He was a Christian first and a gentleman afterwards, and below those professions

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(which he also practised) he never descended. His birth was good, and he possessed, no doubt, some family motto; but, whatever it was, that of "Sancta Simplicitas" would have suited him better. He was far from being a man of the world, and knew nothing of business matters; but the poor and the sick averred that he went about "his Father's business" with a diligence that no Vicar of Natchett had ever before manifested. He had only held his present preferment for a year or two, but the fisher-folk already adored, or, more literally, "swore by him." He had taken their hearts by storm within a few weeks of his arrival. A vessel during a violent gale had shown signals of distress, and though there was no life-boat in the little port, there was a craft that was used for such emergencies. As it was being launched under great difficulties, one of the crew met with an accident that incapacitated him from serving; and, when delay arose in finding a substitute, Æneas Harden, to the amazement of his parishioners, stepped quietly into the vacant place. He was not powerful, and it was complained that

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his legs got in the way, but he was a skilful oarsman, and did his full share in a noble day's work. "That is the sort of parson for my money!" cried the coxswain (who, unfortunately, however, was as poor as a water-rat). "And so say all of *us!*" assented the crew; and they left their "Little Bethel" the next Sabbath morning and trooped into church, for the first time in their lives, to show their admiration of him.

At the present moment, therefore, there were two heroes in Natchett, though neither of them knew it. Mary might have introduced the newcomer to the other in (almost) the very words of the poet:

> "Long-legged seaman, this is he, great by land as thou
> by sea;"

but nothing was farther from her intention. Unwilling as she had been to speak of George Waldron to Mrs. Maitland, she was still less inclined to speak of him to Mr. Harden, though she could not (or, at all events, would not) have told you why. Awkward as was the vicar's way of paying his attentions to her, she knew what was in his mind with regard

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to her, and regretted it; for she felt that she could never accept him as a lover, and to give pain to anybody, much less to one for whom she entertained so sincere a respect, was distressing to her.

As he stood beside her fingering his high white cravat, and playing with his black cotton umbrella (without which he was never seen), and blushing, he looked less like a lover than a begging-letter impostor caught in the act; but for all that, Mary knew what he meant quite as well as he did himself, and was almost as uncomfortable.

"So glad to see you looking so well, and so—I mean with such a wholesome colour, Miss Mary; but the hill is steep, though not quite so bad as that from The Crag, from which I saw you come; would my arm be of any service?"

"No, I thank you, Mr. Harden; it is only that I am a little out of breath."

"Dear, dear, that is bad! Yet Dr. Gray tells me you are so much better."

"There is nothing the matter with me now at all," she said, smiling.

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"Nothing serious, of course not; still, we must—I mean *you* must, but the doctor always says 'we,' you know—be very careful. I suppose you found good Mrs. Waldron in a great state of 'expectation'?"

"Well, naturally," she answered.

Of course she ought to have told him all about Mr. Waldron's arrival; but she had really not a moment to spare.

Fortunately he did not pursue the subject.

"Miss Martha is well, I hope?"

"Yes, but, I am afraid, very hungry. I am late for dinner."

"Permit me to accompany you as far as your door. It is imprudent of you to walk so fast uphill. Dr. Gray, I am sure, would say so. Do not speak till you get to the top. I am so sorry about those periwinkles; any disagreement with a relative of yours is very painful to me."

"Periwinkles?"

Pressed for time as she was, Mary came to a full stop for a moment at that amazing word.

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"Oh, perhaps your uncle has not spoken to you about it. It is only that he claims certain rights on the foreshore as lord of the manor, and these it seems include the periwinkles that are found on the props of the jetty at low water. He says that it is my duty to prevent the children stealing them, as he calls it. He wants me to preach against it. I really can't do that, can I? A pint and a half of periwinkles, they tell me, is the most that can be gathered in an afternoon."

Mary hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry. Her uncle's claim was absurd, of course, to the last degree, but also so unimaginably mean.

"It seems an insignificant matter, indeed," she said.

"Well, yes; but your uncle is so ob—— I mean so resolved about his rights, that I fear there will be trouble about it. You will, I hope, absolve me; my position is such a painful one."

"I am quite sure you will do what is right," interrupted Mary hastily; "there is Martha, as I expected, looking very impatient."

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They had reached Prospect Cottage, and over the little gate that led into a strip of garden Martha could be seen at the open window, like Sister Anne in Bluebeard's Castle.

"I thought you were never coming," she called out. "How are you, Mr. Harden? Will you step in and join us at luncheon?"

The invitation was not so hospitable as it seemed; Miss Vance would have been willing enough to entertain him, but there was not enough for a third person, and she knew he would understand that. No one ever dropped in at any meal in frugal Natchett except to tea; it would in most cases have been embarrassing. Mr. Harden would have given his ears (and they were large ones) to have accepted her proposal, and would have been more than content with a hunch of bread and cheese, but such an intrusion was not to be thought of. What Miss Martha had called luncheon (for let us be genteel or die) was, of course, dinner.

"Thank you, kindly, but I have to go down to the seashore on business."

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"About the fishermen and their periwinkles, no doubt," said Martha contemptuously. "Mrs. Maitland has just been telling me about it."

"Yes; I am afraid Mr. Adderly has taken an extreme view."

"On the contrary, a mean one," answered Martha acidly. "He will be coming into our garden after the snails next, and insisting, as lord of the manor, upon our lending him a pin."

Miss Vance had not the vivacity of Hester Waldron, but in speaking of her uncle she was sometimes stung into epigram.

"Oh, Martha! how can you talk so?" exclaimed Mary reproachfully.

The chuckle in which Mr. Harden had indulged himself was at once strangled in its birth. He assumed the air of one who, having committed an offence—or at least who is an accessory to it afterwards—can only hope that the devotion of a lifetime may atone for the transgression. The severest penance he could hit upon, at a moment's notice,

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was to leave the presence of his "beloved object," and he lifted his hat and walked away.

"What a fool that man makes of himself about you, Mary!" observed Martha contemptuously.

"About *me?* What *do* you mean, Martha?"

"I mean exactly what I say. He knows perfectly well that Uncle Adderly is a brute beast, but just because you interpose with your ridiculous 'How *can* you?' he pretends to regret having thought him otherwise than human. However, since it is so, I do hope you will not permit such partisanship to go unrewarded. These chops, as usual, have cinders in them. 'Love in a hut with water and crust is (Heaven forgive us!) cinders, ashes, dust.' I wonder if it was the poet's experience of lodging-house chops that made him use that peculiar language. And to think that, if you only chose to say that little word 'yes,' you might have sweetbreads every day in the week for dinner."

"I don't care the least for sweetbreads," said Mary drily.

"No, but *I* do. I wish you would not be so

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dreadfully selfish. You can sit by Hetty's sofa by the hour, because it costs you nothing; but though by ever so small an expenditure of words you could make your sister comfortable for life, you grudge it."

"You are not speaking seriously, my dear Martha, I hope," said Mary gravely.

"Perhaps not, but I *mean* seriously. Here is the only *parti* in Natchett literally prostrating himself at your feet—a good man, a kind man, a gentleman—and yet you will not let him kiss——"

"Martha!"

"Pray let me finish. I was going to say 'the hem of your garment.' You could not treat him more coldly if you were what you ought to be, one of Uncle Adderly's co-heiresses."

"That would make no sort of difference, if it were so."

Martha laughed with derisive bitterness.

"It is not necessary to dispute that statement," she said; "I speak of things as they are. The vicarage is the best house in the place. The vicar is the best man to be found anywhere, as I have

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heard you say yourself, and yet you refuse to make him happy. That again is selfishness."

"There are worse things than even that," said Mary.

"Worse things? Of course there are. There is poverty, for instance; the necessity of looking after every shilling; the sordid cares that smirch life's very sunshine; the acceptance of alms from a closed fist."

It was terrible to see a woman, and a young one, so fierce and bitter. "Doubtless," she went on, "you think me selfish to talk in this strain. 'It is on her own account, forsooth,' you are saying to yourself, 'that she is urging me to this course.' You give me no credit for sympathizing with my sister's sad position, her delicate frame, her needs, her sufferings even."

"Oh, Martha, Martha, spare me! I am not suffering, save when I hear you speak like that. I have no needs which are not amply met, though doubtless by your own self-sacrifice."

"No; I went too far. It was ungenerous of me

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to advance that argument, Mary. Forgive me! But since you have used the word, let me say in justice to myself that I am persuading you to make no sacrifice. If Æneas Harden were an old man, miserly as Uncle Adderly himself, but as rich, I can fancy your having scruples where I should have none; but he would make any woman a good husband. He is well off, well born, well spoken of by all who know him, and devoted to you. Compare what you are here"—she looked scornfully round the little ill-furnished room—"with what you might be; your every wish anticipated, your every want supplied, and independent of our uncle."

The last item in this description of Mary's future felicity would have seemed to most ears to partake of the nature of bathos; but it was not so with the speaker, nor with the person she addressed. In the sisters' eyes Uncle Adderly, though viewed by them in very different lights, was a person of supreme importance, and to have attained a position that would render his grudging gifts a matter of no consequence would have seemed to both of them

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like sitting with the gods above the clouds in undying bliss. But even this argument failed to move Mary Vance.

"Let us talk of something else, dear Martha," she said quietly. "I have a piece of news for you. Mr. George Waldron has come home."

"Come home? Why did neither you nor Mr. Harden say a word about it?"

"Well, Mr. Harden did not know it."

"Why did you not tell him?" put in Martha quickly.

"I had not time—we—we were talking of something else, just as you and I have been."

Mary was conscious that her sister was regarding her with great intentness, almost with severity; that she was noting her high colour, and the hesitation in her speech, with an inexplicable interest, which increased her confusion.

"Have you *seen* him?"

"Oh yes, I have seen him. Hetty insisted upon my stopping for a few minutes, though, of course, I

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wanted to get away. He took post-horses here instead of coming by the coach."

"He must be a rich man," said Martha, as if to herself.

"Scarcely that, I think," said Mary, smiling; "he was in a hurry, no doubt, to see his mother and sisters, to whom, as you know, he is devoted."

"Just so," said Martha drily. "You are eating nothing, my dear; but that is not surprising. The pudding has got cinders in it, like the chops."

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CHAPTER V.

THE SPA.

THE Spa at Natchett was not in very high repute anywhere, and least of all in its own locality. The water ought to have been wholesome, for it had not only a horrible taste, but an evil odour, yet only one person believed in its miraculous properties. The exception, however, was of importance, for it was Squire Adderly. He owned the spring, and his beneficent soul would have rejoiced to see it benefit his fellow-creatures; he would in that case have given it every encouragement—built a temple for those who sought the fount, and let the Spa gardens on building leases. The fact was, however, nobody would drink the waters who could help it; but there were some persons who could not help it. Martha Vance was compelled to take a glass every morning. She had on one occasion, not imprudently—quite

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the contrary; it was, in fact, solely to please her uncle, but without due regard to consequences—informed Mr. Adderly that she thought "they did her good," though she did add that they were rather disagreeable. It was almost the only occasion that he seemed pleased with her.

"Well, mind you go on taking them," he said; "if you do not I shall know it is just because they are a little distasteful, a proof of weakness of character that I should be sorry to see in you. Mary is a bit of an invalid, they tell me, and it will doubtless do her, too, all the good in the world."

But Dr. Gray stepped in with his professional veto and saved Mary. He said that under no circumstances should she partake of that "beastly stuff," an injurious epithet which it is possible he may have heard applied, in a moment of nausea, to his own medicines. If Mr. Adderly could have persuaded Dr. Gray to give him a scientific opinion in favour of the Spa, it is possible he would have paid money for it; but no money that he would, or even could, have paid would have extorted such a

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testimonial. That there had always been a well at the Spa, the doctor admitted; but as for its exceptional qualities, he used to offer a similar explanation of them to that given by Dame Deborah Giles respecting the chalybeate spring at Buttercombe Parva. "Killibit Well! don't tell me nothink about your Killibit Wells, for it's all a pack of nonsense. A nasty taste has it? Ah, it's likely to be nasty; don't *I* know? Tinker's jackass was a-coming whoam years ago, with a load of salt, and dropped down dead there—that 'e did; and they buried him, salt and all, in that 'ere well. Nasty! why, o' course it's nasty; well it may be. Jackass and salt be at the bottom o't, that's why." Such a shocking story as that was not indeed told of Natchett Spa, but the legends in connection with it were of a kindred character.

Mr. Adderly's unpopularity of course accounted for some of them, and his method of advertising the virtues of his Spa for others. What he should have done was to have imported a scientific authority from London, with as many letters after his name

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as possible, and have got a testimonial out of *him*. A conscientious man of science could (for a proper consideration) have surely written, "I dare not trust myself to say what I think of Natchett Spa as a remedial agent." Instead of which the squire went dropping shillings and sixpences about (itself a most suspicious proceeding in his case) among the sick poor, with a recommendation to try the Spa, like a cheap-jack with a quack medicine. He made old Sarah Jones custodian of the place, and forgave her the rent of her cottage by way of payment. But there was said to be a dreadful clause in the agreement, by which she was bound to drink the water, *and look as if she liked it*, whenever a possible purchaser of that elixir came within view. Hetty Waldron had christened her Rebecca, because of her always being found at the well, and Becky instead of Sally she was called by everybody. It is fair to say that the squire himself drank the water. He came down at intervals to collect the gifts that had been offered at the shrine of Hygeia (the precious liquid was dispensed at a penny a tumbler),

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and carry them off in his carriage in a canvas bag; and always set a good example by draining a glass to the dregs with an imperturbable countenance. The hopes that were founded by some people upon this circumstance were doomed to disappointment. "He feeds on poisons, like the Pontic King, and they have no power," said Dr. Gray. "It is only like to like," said Hetty; "the man is iron, to begin with." At all events, he did drink it and survived.

On the morning after George Waldron's return home he visited the Spa in company with his family, partly from curiosity, because it was a new discovery since his day, and one of which he had heard a great deal (though, it must be confessed, not much to its credit); and partly because the road thither, through the public gardens, was a smooth and pleasant one, especially adapted for Hetty's conveyance. The young fellow took charge of that vehicle himself, controlling it with ease with a single hand, and at the same time leaving himself at liberty to converse with its occupant. It was a

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pleasant but pathetic spectacle—the strong, lithe man leaning over the frail, crippled girl, and returning smile for smile as they moved along; while the mother and sister walked a little behind, happy in the contemplation of that devotion of Strength to Weakness, and thankful for the return of their dear one from the worst of wars.

George had twelve months' leave, a term so long that no thought of parting shadowed their happy present. They were talking of him, of course—they had always had him in their thoughts when he was abroad, and it was not likely that it should be otherwise when he was before their eyes—in low, loving tones, like the murmur of the bee about the blossom.

"How bright and young he looks! does he not, Maggie?"

"You did not expect him to be gray, did you, mother?" she answered, smiling. "He is but eight-and-twenty, you know."

"But some men at that age look—well, not

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middle-aged, of course, but they have altogether grown out of the boy."

She was thinking of John Dennet, and Maggie knew it. John was a little older than George, but looked much older. He had not, indeed, had so much experience of "brawling Courts" as he could have wished; but dwelling in "the smoky purlieus of the law" had aged him; that, and hope deferred, the delay of the solicitor's clerk in seeking his chambers; the doubt, though scarcely yet confessed even to himself, whether that messenger of joy ever would visit them. John had certainly grown out of the boy.

"I suppose it is a life of action," sighed Maggie, "always having duties to perform, and living in the open air."

"Nay, my dear, there is not much air in India," returned the widow, a little piqued at this explanation of George's juvenility, which could have equally well applied to a tiger-hunter; "and though, as you say, he has duties, and very important ones, they have not prevented him from cultivating the most

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serious thoughts. His letters, indeed, except when, for our sakes, and especially Hetty's, he gives reins to his high spirits, are by no means those of a young man; I wish, for his sake, that they were more so. It is time that he was thinking of making a home for himself. Nothing would please me more than to see him happily married."

"That would be indeed delightful," assented Maggie warmly.

Though the consequences of such a step must have been obvious to them, it never entered into these two women's minds to regard it with disfavour because it must needs turn George's income—or the greater portion of it—into another channel than that into which it at present flowed. The word "self" was as completely blotted out of their vocabulary as "impossible" was out of Napoleon's. As the widow's eyes glanced at the invalid-couch in front of them, it seemed, however, to remind her of the circumstance in question.

"I do believe," she said, "that what has kept George a bachelor, or rather banished from his mind

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the thought of marriage, is the necessity he feels imposed upon him of providing for his family, and Hetty especially."

"As far as Hetty is concerned," replied Maggie, "I have not the heart to say a word; but as for you, dear mother, I trust that, when John's talents get to be appreciated, there will be other sources——"

"No, dear, no," interrupted Mrs. Waldron, "that is quite out of the question. I cannot refuse the bounty of my own boy, but from another——"

"But will John never seem like a son to you, mother?" pleaded Maggie reproachfully.

"Yes, dear, yes," answered the other hastily. "He's a good fellow, and I love him for his own sake as well as yours; but you do not understand." The widow dropped her veil, and was silent for a moment, then added very kindly: "When you are a a mother yourself, dear Maggie, you *will* understand; in the meantime be assured that I understand *you;* that I rate the treasure of your love for me—nay, of both your loves—at its true value. When John, as you say, becomes my son, my own needs, or rather

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what George persists in deeming such, will be small indeed. They demand now no such sacrifices as he is constantly imposing upon himself; and if I have a sorrow in connection with him, it is the thought of them. They must be put a stop to; or, at all events, they must not be suffered to be an obstacle to his future happiness. I am sure you agree with me in this."

"Indeed I do," said Maggie earnestly. "I was thinking only last night, that if George could only take back with him, when he returns to India, a dutiful and loving wife—one we had confidence in and knew all about—what a comfort it would be to all of us."

"It is curious," answered Mrs. Waldron, smiling, "but I have been thinking the very same thing myself. All the thinking in the world, however, will not bring it about. We must let matters take their course. Dear me! that is Mr. Adderly's carriage; and there is Martha Vance."

Martha, however, was not *in* her uncle's carriage. It was characteristic of him that, though he had

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overtaken her on her way to the Spa, or on what had become her way when she caught sight of him, he had not even offered her a seat. She could get down there as quickly, walking through the Spa gardens, as he on wheels round by the road. But that was not the reason of his discourtesy; it would never have done to put her on a level with himself, by bestowing on her such a mark of honour and relationship. It might have encouraged false hopes in her, or, what he resented much more, the notion in the public mind that he and his niece were on familiar terms. She would have to go on foot all the days of her life, and therefore it was ridiculous to accustom her, even so far as five minutes could do it, to riding in a carriage. The very idea of such a thing, and, perhaps, some dim consciousness of having done a boorish thing, which in natures like his makes a man more of a boor than ever, brought a scowl into his face. He was standing by the Spa with a glass in his hand, and so was his niece, but they did not give the impression of drinking one another's health at all. He didn't like her making

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faces at the unpalatable draught, which she could not help doing. He also, as usual, suspected Rebecca of having pocketed some of the tribute that he had come for.

"There is twopence less than there was last week," he was saying complainingly.

The old dame was not of a sensitive nature, and despised such aspersions; but she was also one of the few who dared to give the squire "as good as he brought." She was, he knew in his heart, perfectly honest, and it would not have been easy to supply her place, so he was compelled to put up with the freedom of her tongue.

"I can't persuade people to drink the water whether they like or no," she answered, with a glance at Martha (as much as to say, "they are not *my* nieces"). "They must either take it or leave it, and most of them leaves it."

"I don't understand why the average is not kept up," said Mr. Adderly irritably.

"Kep' up! kep' down, you mean," said the old woman in a shrill squeaky voice, that could be

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heard a good way off. "Some on 'em finds it very hard to keep it down."

"Hold your tongue, you old fool! there's somebody coming," muttered the squire—"Who are these people, Martha?"

He knew who they were perfectly well. Hetty's spring-couch was known to everybody; he had been on speaking terms with the family for years, though he seldom met them; but it was Mr. Adderly's way to ignore all his neighbours who were not county people.

"They are the Waldrons," replied Martha, dexterously emptying her glass upon the turf; she was not going to be seen for the first time by the new arrival with a wry face. "That is Mr. George, the Indian hero."

"From India, is he?" murmured the squire, taking no notice of the reference to his heroic character, for heroism was out of his line; "then tell him that the Spa is much recommended for the liver."

As an initial observation to a friend whom

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Martha had not seen for ten years, the remark itself was hardly to be recommended. The squire, indeed, seemed scarcely to suppose that his commands would be instantaneously obeyed, since he opened relations with the newcomers himself by nodding his head and saying "Good-morning." He had never taken off his hat to a lady in the open air in his life, and it was not to be expected that he would begin committing such extravagances of courtesy in the present case. He did, however, extend two fingers to George Waldron, partly because they had not met for as many years, and partly because he wished by conciliation to get a penny out of him.

The young man took no immediate notice of this sign of amity, but shook hands cordially with Martha Vance. Though she knew that such a compliment paid to her at her uncle's expense would be bitterly resented, she could not help experiencing a certain feeling of gratification. Here was a gentleman at last—and one of the highest class, as she had the good sense to recognise—who appre-

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ciated the honour of her acquaintance. He did not mind her being poor and dependent; he did not care a rush for the millionaire, though he was standing by, who owned her for his slave.

"It is a long time since we last met, Miss Vance," he said; "but I think I should have known you anywhere."

"And I you, Mr. Waldron," she answered, and quite truthfully; he was altered, of course, but there was, as his mother had said, something of the boy about him still.

"That is not surprising," he answered, smiling; "for I have not had the chance of growing out of knowledge as you have had." Nevertheless, as he reflected, she had been older than her sister in years, and in character much older; it struck him now that she looked like "an old girl"—a girl, that is, who has much less youth about her than a young woman.

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CHAPTER VI.

THE AFFABILITY OF UNCLE ADDERLY.

It may have been taken for granted that, while Mr. George and Martha were exchanging their greetings, the only other gentleman present was doing his best to make himself agreeable to the rest of the party; but this was by no means the case. Perhaps the squire was modest, and, knowing that his "best" was not very attractive, preferred a masterly inaction; for not a word did he say to anybody.

To judge by the earnest look with which he regarded the two speakers, it might, however, have been said of him, as of the reticent parrot, that he thought the more. There was certainly something or other that interested him in their proceedings, which was a compliment of a high kind. Indeed, he was generally so absolutely inattentive to any-

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thing that did not concern himself, that one was forced to the conclusion that, somehow or other, the behaviour of this young couple *did* concern him. His ire at the neglect he had suffered from George Waldron seemed to have passed away, and when that gentleman had made an end of his talk with Martha, Mr. Adderly again made signs of amity. Unlike the Sibyl, who, when her MS. was rejected, brought less and less to her editor, so to speak, he now offered the young fellow three fingers instead of two. George looked at them, carefully selected the same number from his own "bunch of fives," and the two men hooked and eyed, for shaking hands you couldn't call it.

It was not the sort of salutation the squire was accustomed to receive in exchange for his own. He looked for something more than reciprocity. It might be free trade, but what the squire had hitherto demanded (and generally obtained) was protection for himself and free trade from everybody else. And still he kept his temper. It might not have been a good thing to do, but (just as, when a

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man keeps a savage dog, it is at least to his credit that it is tied up) it was better than letting it go. This effort at conciliation was unprecedented, and astonished all but its object, who did not know the squire's idiosyncrasies. "I warrant 'twill prove an excuse for a glass," murmured Hetty to herself. She thought Mr. Adderly was actuated by the motive which really had animated him in the first instance—George's penny. But he had really another and much more serious reason for being conciliatory.

"I hope you are now coming home to stop, sir, and not to run away again," observed Mr. Adderly. He spoke with a certain pomposity, like a parish teacher reproving a workhouse lad for playing the truant; yet it was somehow plain that his intention was to be urbane.

"I have twelve months' leave, and mean to spend it all in Natchett, if my family will stand it," returned George, smiling.

"I dare say you will be able to make some

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pecuniary arrangement with them that will be found mutually convenient," said the squire affably.

Martha pressed her thin lips together till she hardly seemed to have any mouth at all. Both Mrs. Waldron and Maggie turned crimson. There came a very unpleasant look into George's eyes, but Hetty's face was suffused with fun, and the silver laughter that rained from the spring-couch was too infectious for him to resist. Brother and sister broke into quite a duet of mirth, which was prolonged and intensified by the gravity of their companions. Mr. Adderly looked more than grave—exceedingly glum—and, though unconscious of having said anything humorous, he felt that it was he whom they were laughing at. He hated laughter, and hated anything done at his own expense, and here were the two things in combination.

"Well, Miss Hester, *you* must be better," he said acidly, "to laugh like that."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Adderly, I *am* better," returned the invalid sweetly; "the Spa always does me good."

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"Well, of course," answered the squire, much mollified, "its effect is certainly marvellous in many cases."

"It is more," she replied with enthusiasm; "for though I never take the water, even the sight of the people taking it exhilarates me."

"Really?" said Mr. Adderly doubtfully; he was quite ready to believe the young lady's statement, but had some suspicion of her *bonâ fides*. "Everybody who tries it likes it—that is, I mean," he added hastily, "benefits by it. Tell Mr. Waldron, Martha, what a blessing it has been to you, and persuade him to try it. As a climacteric it is unrivalled."

This was a dreadful trial to Martha. She dared not disobey her uncle, yet shrank exceedingly from recommending to Mr. Waldron what she knew to be so very unpleasant. If she could have shaken her head, or given some other sign of warning, she would have done it, but Mr. Adderly was looking at her with some impatience.

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"I will take a glass, by all means," exclaimed George good-naturedly; "why not?"

"He *is* a hero," murmured Hetty; "there is no doubt of it. If he takes it without pinching his nose, he is a perfect Paladin."

At a sign from her master, Rebecca dived into the little cellar which was built about the spring, and produced a goblet of the elixir. It was yellow as the Tiber, and had an odour like to that of the Thames at Barking Creek in a hot June.

George shut his eyes and drained the glass; to hesitate he felt was to be lost. Martha looked infinitely grateful, and Hetty clapped her gloved hands applaudingly.

"He is looking round for a spoonful of jam, mamma," she said, "which you always used to give him, poor dear boy!"

"Come, it's not so bad, after all, is it, young gentleman?" exclaimed the squire.

"No; not so bad—as I expected," submitted the victim. "There is nothing else to be done, is there?" he added resignedly.

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"There is a penny to pay," observed the squire sententiously—"an absurd price for so remedial an agent. It would be invaluable in a tropical climate. I am thinking of bottling it and sending it to India."

"Oh, do!" exclaimed Hetty with enthusiasm; but I am afraid she meant "send it *all* away."

"It is not altogether unknown there," observed George gravely; "I have read about it in Delhi."

This was very true—in Hetty's letters.

"You don't say so? This is really interesting," remarked the squire. "I would give a liberal commission to any agent who would push the spring."

"It would require an elephant," observed Hetty.

"Why, miss?" inquired the squire sharply.

"Well, I mean for advertising purposes—posters."

"Pooh, pooh! there must be no vulgarity in disposing of a commodity of this kind; it is not like lemonade or ginger-beer."

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"That is quite true," said Hetty, with an air of conviction.

"If you should *really* think seriously of the matter, Mr. Waldron," continued the squire, "I should be happy to consider your views. If you will look in at Natchett Hall, any day—after lunch—I shall be glad to see you."

"You are very kind," answered George.

To say that Mr. Adderly *looked* kind would have been an exaggeration; it is difficult to do so without any previous practice; but he was obviously well pleased with his new acquaintance.

"Now the ice has been broken, as it were," he said, with a wintry smile, "you and Martha can come down here every morning and drink the waters together and compare notes."

It was a strange suggestion, but not so strange as it would have seemed to those who heard it, could they have known what the speaker had in his mind.

"How delightful!" cried Hetty ecstatically; then

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to herself: "This is funnier than any play;" and though she had never had a chance of witnessing a dramatic performance, it is probable she was right in her assumption.

"I don't think that would quite do, Mr. Adderly," observed Mrs. Waldron drily.

She objected to her George's precious time at home being disposed of by anybody, and especially in the fashion suggested.

"Why not?" inquired the squire with irritation. Then, in a lower and confidential tone: "Let the young people settle matters their own way."

George and Martha were talking together in a low tone, which perhaps Mr. Adderly took for an interchange of tender thoughts.

"I hope, Mr. Waldron," she was saying, "that you will acquit me of having any sympathy whatever with either the Spa or its owner."

"I do indeed. Do you think it possible that I should have so far forgotten you and your sister, and all about you? I had the great pleasure of see-

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ing her yesterday, looking, I thought, quite strong and well."

"Yes."

It was a brief enough rejoinder to such a speech, and the tone in which it was spoken, if not absolutely curt, was cold.

"I hope *she* doesn't play tricks with her health in that way," he continued, pointing to the glass which Martha still held in her hand.

"No. Dr. Gray has forbidden her to take the water."

"Thank Heaven and him for that!" returned the young fellow. "You are still at Prospect Cottage, of course?" He was looking at it through the trees with obvious interest. "It is charmingly situated, but the hill must be a disadvantage—I mean to any person in delicate health. To have to climb a hill at the end of a long walk is always fatiguing."

"There are many walks upon the level; that to Hendon Head, for instance."

"But your sister is scarcely equal to such a walk as that, is she?"

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"When she has a good day she likes it; Dr. Gray is a great stickler for air and exercise. I must really say a word to dear Maggie, who has been left quite out in the cold."

Mr. George himself was rather in the cold as regarded Martha, but he was quite unaware of it. He could not understand that the subject of her sister could be anything but interesting to her; he perceived that his questions about her had been answered by his companion with a certain reserve; but he attributed it to a disinclination on her part to be reminded of the delicacy of Mary's constitution. This was strange, considering that she was admitted on all hands to be now convalescent.

Maggie, too, asked after Mary; but in her case Martha seemed to find nothing distasteful in her inquiries. Mary seldom came down to the Spa, because the hill, on the return-journey, was so trying a one; but she could do it, and if she had known that Mr. Waldron had been going thither that morning, would probably have accompanied her sister.

If she had done so some serious complications

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would certainly have been avoided. But this is not an unusual circumstance in human life. It is the small matters which precipitate the great ones, as the laugh brings down the avalanche. The going out of doors five minutes earlier or later than usual, the turning to the right hand instead of the left, or *vice versâ*—these are the things that lead us to fortune or ruin, to life or death. "I have done *nothing*, doctor, nothing rash of any kind," says the sick man, "to induce this frightful malady." And that may be true also; sometimes even doing nothing is the worst thing for ourselves we can do.

Mr. Adderly had not *that* imprudence at least to reproach himself with on this particular morning.

He suddenly resolved to take what was for him a most extraordinary step; it was not what many people would have thought much of, but in this case it was a *coup* of the first magnitude.

The Waldrons and his niece were all talking together in a group; George was standing a little apart, but with his eyes on Miss Vance, whose behaviour, as has been said, had somewhat surprised

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him. The squire looked at him with a significance which unfortunately was utterly thrown away upon its object, as in a loud voice he exclaimed, "Martha, get into my carriage, and I will drop you at the Cottage, which will save you the walk up the hill."

It is curious what entirely different views people will take of the same thing. This proposition, which seemed to the speaker one of the most courteous and ingratiating of which the human mind could conceive, struck George as rude and dictatorial; whereas the rest of the Waldron family were amazed at its affability, and Martha herself could hardly believe her ears. Her uncle, however, had already scrambled into his vehicle, in his impatient way, and was beckoning to her with the earnestness of a railway signalman. With a good-bye to her friends, so hasty that it did not admit of hand-shaking, she seated herself by Mr. Adderly's side, and was whisked away. Mr. Squeers, in his Sunday clothes, felt, we are told, astonishment at finding himself so respectable; but Martha's sentiments were of a much more

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exalted kind. She felt like those mortals we read of in Lempriere, who were snatched up in the chariots of the gods, and didn't quite know what to make of it.

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CHAPTER VII.

MARY TAKES HER PLEASURE SADLY.

"THERE!" said Mr. Adderly, in the self-satisfied tone of one who has performed a good action at no slight inconvenience to himself; "I think I have done a good stroke of business for you this morning."

The carriage, though it would not have made any particular sensation in Hyde Park, was a good one; the horses, though their coats might have been sleeker, were a tolerable pair; and, but for the presence of her companion, Martha would have rather enjoyed her drive; but though she knew that an honour had been conferred upon her, she did not see much material advantage in it.

"You are very kind," she answered gently, "to give me a lift, uncle."

"Ah," he put in quickly; "that's the very word.

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I always said of you that you knew on which side your bread was buttered. Well, now, it's your own fault if you don't make hay while the sun shines, and in that case I shall wash my hands of you."

This collection—or confusion—of metaphors was snapped out in jerks and starts, to Martha's great bewilderment; nor was their meaning at all assisted by the expression of the speaker, which had lost all its recent affability, and become even more vinegarish and menacing than usual.

"I am very sorry, but I don't quite understand——"

"What!" he interrupted. "Is it possible you can be such an idiot? Come, come! play none of these young-lady tricks on me, miss, for I have not the time for them. This young fellow from India—who hasn't seen ten white women in ten years, I dare say—is evidently struck with you. What he said to himself, however, doubtless was, 'But this girl will not have a penny.' He's quite right, of course; but there is no reason why we should not persuade him to the contrary. What he is saying to

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himself *now* is, 'But she has a rich uncle who takes her about in his carriage, and will leave her a pretty sum.' If he is fool enough to think that, let him."

Never in all her life had Martha Vance hated her uncle so intensely as she hated him now, as he poured these coarse and cruel suggestions into her unwilling ear. It was difficult for her, notwithstanding her long apprenticeship to self-restraint, to prevent the loathing she felt for him from expressing itself in looks or words. What moved her most, however, in this brutal plain-speaking, was that she was secretly conscious of there being just a scintilla of truth in it. It was absurd indeed to say that any serious thoughts of Mr. George Waldron as even a possible husband had entered into her mind; women's thoughts do not often advance in such directions with the rapidity assumed by Mr. Adderly; but it was nevertheless true that before Mr. Waldron's arrival Martha had allowed herself to speculate upon what sort of person he was likely to be, with a vague view of the contingency in question. The vicar was already bespoken; or, at all events, Mary

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had but to hold up her finger to bespeak him; but the new arrival—the only other eligible male in the place—was understood to be "fancy free"; and the fancy of Miss Martha Vance had wandered, not, indeed, "free," but in a certain not wholly aimless way, in his direction. When she saw him, it had distinctly taken shape; he had made a favourable impression on her; she had been grateful to him for drinking the Spa water, for her sake; she had been pleased with his manners, attracted by his appearance, flattered by his attentions. The resentment she had felt at his making such particular reference to her sister was indeed proof positive of how favourably she regarded him. But it was one thing to be conscious of all this in her own mind, and quite another to have her scarce half-formed design discovered, or taken for granted by another.

"It seems to me, uncle," she replied with a forced smile, "leaving my own sentiments out of the question—as, in the case of such an insignificant person as myself, it is only reasonable to do—that you are crediting Mr. Waldron with an idea that has

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not so much as entered into his mind. Until to-day he has never set eyes on me."

"Tut, tut, I know all that," broke in the squire impatiently; "you can't marry him to-morrow, of course, though it would save a great deal of trouble and bother if you could. What I want to impress upon you is the necessity, if the idea is not there already, of *putting* it into his mind. He has an excellent salary, and lives a long way off;" here he suddenly reflected that that second circumstance, though an advantage to himself (of whom he was mainly thinking), could hardly be a dazzling prospect for his companion; "though he will not have to live there for ever," he added hastily, "but will retire on a nice pension, with an allowance after death to his wife and children. What a prospect this is for a girl in your position I need hardly say. Why, if the vicar takes Mary, you will both be provided for. Then you will doubtless forget the hand that is now feeding you; but gratitude is a thing I don't look for."

"I, for my part, shall never forget it," said

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Martha earnestly. She spoke the truth, but in a different sense from that into which the squire's self-complacency translated it.

If she could have had her way with the "hand" he spoke of, she would have bitten it through, then and there.

"Well, well, fine words butter no parsnips," returned her companion, deceived, but still unmollified; "the proof of the pudding is in the eating; the best way to express your thanks for the generosity I have extended to you is to do what I tell you. Give the fellow every encouragement; hook him, play him, and I'll stand by you with the gaff." Tickled by this unwonted union of wit and metaphor, the squire actually chuckled.

Mary was standing at the parlour window when the carriage drew up at the Cottage, and saw him smile. The two portents—the sight of her sister sitting by her uncle's side and the smile on her uncle's face—were too much for her. She could only stare; the consciousness that her pretty nose

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was being flattened against the window-pane alone convinced her that she was not dreaming. What had happened? What *could* have happened? Perhaps Martha had sprained her ankle; that would have accounted for the squire having given her a lift, but scarcely for his smile. No. Martha descended from the vehicle without a limp; and at parting from the squire was dowered with a short, sharp nod, which was his *ne plus ultra* of courtesy to either sister. Then he drove off, and Mary opened the door with eager hands.

"My *dear* Martha! What on earth is the meaning of this?" With a glad surprise in her sweet eyes, she waited for the revelation; there must have been some sort of reconciliation between her uncle and her sister; she had always said that he was not so black as Martha painted him; perhaps he was "coming round" as regarded natural affection, for of material advantage she had no thought."

"There is no meaning in it," replied Martha curtly. "It was only a caprice of the old wretch's; he found me at the Spa and cried 'Jump in'—I

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mean into his carriage, of course—and I did so. *Voilà tout.*"

"But he has never done that before!"

"No, and I hope he never will again. I *know* that some day or other I shall tell him exactly what I think of him."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mary. Indeed, the menace was an alarming one. "I hope he has not been saying disagreeable things to you."

"You must be sanguine indeed if you hope that," said Martha, taking off her bonnet and shawl. Her face was paler even than usual. Her very lips were white.

"There was nothing new, if you mean that," she went on; "he is a cruel, cowardly, false old man."

"Surely not false, my dear," said Mary, in plaintive remonstrance.

"Very good, let us say shameless, then, and have done with him. I have seen the Waldrons."

Mary's face flushed up at once with eager interest.

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"Indeed? What, all of them?"

"Yes; they were all at the Spa. I quite agree with you that Mr. George is likely to be a great acquisition to Natchett. He was very nice and pleasant, I thought."

"I felt sure that you would like him," said Mary. "He seems so kind and gentle, and—and—natural."

"Well, I have only seen him once, and but for a few minutes," said Martha drily; "but what I did see of him I certainly liked."

The roses on Mary's cheeks became peonies, as though she had had her pretty ears boxed. She felt the tacit reproof that had been administered to her—for had not she, too, only seen George Waldron once, and that but for a few minutes?—and also that it was impossible to defend herself.

"And how was dear Hetty?"

"Very funny, as usual; she shot an arrow or two at Uncle Adderly; but of course they glanced off his rhinoceros hide. What do you say to a walk to Hendon Head? It is a lovely day, and the tide will

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serve for the Jut. Let us take our lunch and our sketch-books, and pass the afternoon there."

"There is a good deal of wind, is there not?" answered Mary doubtfully. She was somehow not in favour of the expedition that day, though it was generally a favourite one with her. It was almost certain that the Waldrons would call at the Cottage that afternoon, and she was unwilling to miss them. Martha had seen them already, and could not, of course, feel this; but it was difficult to make use of that argument. Her sister might reply, "Why, you have seen the Waldrons yourself not twenty-four hours ago; why should you be so anxious to see them again?" She might even ask what made her so solicitous about the matter at all, since these friends of theirs lived in the same village, and had been seen every day for years. Whether Martha read her thoughts or not, she certainly regarded her with a strange and rather severe expression.

"There is a wind, of course," she answered contemptuously, "and a north wind, but that does not hurt people in June. Dr. Grey says you can't get

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too much air; and the more wind there is the finer the sight will be on the Jut."

"Then by all means let us go," said Mary, with an attempt at enthusiasm. "We are not made of sugar."

To judge by Martha's face, she at least was not made of that material. Though she had got her way, she was by no means pleased with the way it had been got. Sisters who live with one another do not require to be students of human nature to know when an assent to a proposition is genuine or compulsory.

"The sooner we start, the better the tide will serve," she observed drily. "We can take some ham sandwiches in our hand-bags."

Mary ran upstairs to put on her things, but when she reached her room she was not in such a hurry. She spent very little time at the glass, but an unusual amount of it in looking out of the window. The weather, of course, had now become an object of interest to her. It was fine and clear, and the Castle stood up grandly against the blue sky;

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The Crag could also be distinctly seen nestling, as it were, under its protection. She wondered whether the Waldrons had gone home. If not, it was possible Hetty might look in upon her before she started for Hendon Head. In that case Martha could hardly insist upon setting out, and if the call was a long one, it would be too late to go. She had no presentiment of evil concerning the proposed expedition, but she had a presentiment of something pleasant if they stopped at home.

These reflections, if they deserved so ambitious a name, were suddenly cut short by her sister's voice from below, inquiring what detained her—a question she would have found some difficulty in answering even to herself. She ran downstairs, and found their extempore meal already prepared, and wrapped up neatly in two white-paper parcels; there were also two flasks containing water, of which for drinking purposes—though there was so much of it otherwise—there was none to be got at the Jut. It was not a luxurious provision, but the sisters had not been accustomed to the cold chicken and cham-

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pagne which some people always associate with out-of-door entertainments. There had been times when Mary would have looked forward to the expedition as a great treat; but now it was difficult not to show that she took the pleasure sadly. Her last act as she left the house was to turn her head in the other direction towards the Castle.

"What are you looking for?" inquired Martha sharply.

"The wind," replied Mary artlessly; "I see it *is* in the north; if it continues to rise there will be a fine sea on, and the waves on the Jut will be splendid."

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CHAPTER VIII.

THE APPLICATION FROM AMERICA.

NATCHETT HALL, notwithstanding its name and its considerable size, was scarcely an imposing residence, and certainly not a picturesque one. The line of the poetess, "Ye homes of merry England, how beautiful you be!" could hardly be applied to it; it had not an ancestral air; in fact, but for certain traces of damp upon its stuccoed walls, induced by a hundred storms, and for the inclination of the ornamental trees contemporary with it, caused by the prevailing wind, it might have been built the day before yesterday. Mr. Adderly had been his own architect, which accounted for a good deal; a man who has built up his own fortunes, he had concluded, could surely build his own house—and do it cheaper than if he placed it in professional hands; but the result, from the architectural point of

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view, at least, had not been satisfactory. Still, it was unmistakably the home of a rich man. There was plenty of plate-glass about it, and, though the jest about "more carving and less gilding" could not have been applied to its owner, since he gave no entertainments, there *was* gilding. The rooms were spacious; and what were rather superfluously called the reception-rooms were really handsome. They were hung with very large pictures in very large frames; the largest of all was a portrait of the proprietor himself with a book in his hand—the nature of which was a mystery. From what we know of his opinions, it could hardly be a Prayer-book; and it was not likely, however characteristic would have been the touch, that the artist had represented him with a ledger. It was a large volume, and as it could not be taken (so to speak) from life, since there were no books of any kind at the Hall, public opinion pronounced it to be a backgammon board.

What was missing, however, even more than books, at Natchett Hall, were those signs of culture, or at least of refinement, that betoken the presence

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of a lady. Though Mr. Adderly had nothing else in common with Smollett's hero, Commodore Trunnion's house was hardly more conspicuously deficient in the female element. It was too late in the day to wonder why the squire didn't marry; but, as everybody said, it was amazing that he should let those two nice nieces of his remain cooped up in their cottage, when there was so much room to spare at the Hall, and such evident need for them. In its bareness and discomfort the house was more like some public building, erected for business purposes, than an English home. The dining-room seemed always ready for its board of directors; in the large mirrors of the drawing-room there had never been reflected a vase of flowers or a bit of fancy work. These apartments were rarely used at all, for Mr. Adderly passed most of his time in his "study," where he kept his desk, his account-books, and his slippers.

His servants were few, silent and discreet. They had become so by a process of elimination; all of a buoyant disposition had found the place intolerable,

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and left of their own accord, or had been expelled without warning or their month's wages. Those who remained had been more than once rewarded for their fidelity by hearing what the others—preferring the immediate relief of their minds to the problematical compensation the law might subsequently afford them—had said of their master to his face. A butler who had been recommended to him by a county magnate found life so exceedingly different at the Hall from what he had been accustomed to, that he took to drink, and losing all professional reticence in the dark hour of departure, had called the squire "a scaly varmint." The vagueness of the epithet formed, perhaps, a part of its attraction—it is always difficult to account for the popularity of nicknames—but from henceforth, below stairs, the lord of Natchett Hall was always spoken of by his retainers by that amazing title. It was even more appreciated by those outside the house, who perhaps found a greater appropriateness in it from their familiarity with the "creeping things" of "the garden or the wild," and when "the scaly one"

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or "the varmint" was spoken of in the Parliament of the village ale-house there was no one to cry "Name."

In his presence, however, Mr. Adderly's servants were exceedingly respectful in their manners. He never looked at them, nor at anybody else, when he was speaking to them, but he had a way of turning his eyes suddenly on them when it was least expected (as a policeman turns his bull's-eye), which made any temptation to relaxation (such as putting the tongue out, for example) dangerous in the highest degree. Still, they had their weak moments, which Mr. Adderly never had. Among his many virtues consistency in austerity was pre-eminent. Even when he smiled it gave one the impression that it caused him pain, as if his mouth had been a widening wound.

Nevertheless, as on a winter's day at the Pole there are degrees of frost, the squire was not always quite so cold as he was at other times. When he made a good bargain he sometimes thawed a little.

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This was the case with him when he was driving home after that expedition to the Spa we have recorded. He had, indeed, made no actual bargain, but he saw, as he thought, the prospect of making one. He grunted as he lay back in his carriage, as a certain less noble animal is wont to grunt when he hears the clink of the pail that presages food, and nodded to himself in a very complacent manner. His coachman could not see the nod, but he heard the grunt, and recognised the amelioration of his master's mind, and, when Perkins the butler came to the door, closed his left eye to give his fellow-servant notice of the change for the better. If he had closed the right, it would have meant, "Look out for squalls; the scaly one is scalier than ever." In that case, Perkins would have maintained an inviolable silence; but, as matters were, he ventured to say that there was roast mutton for lunch, and that the servants' dinner-bell had rung. The connection between these facts requires a brief explanation. When Mr. Adderly's servants had a hot joint for dinner—which was by no means always—he in-

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variably had a cut of it for his lunch; it saved trouble—and a little money.

"Well, well, put a hot plate over it. I will just look at my letters."

This was not pleasant for Perkins, since his own dinner would thus be subject to interruption; but he merely said, "Very good, sir," to his master, and "varmint" to himself.

The squire entered his study hastily—for those were in error who asserted that "he did not care for anything, not even food:" he liked his meat hot—and opened the letter-bag in a trice. There was happily but one letter; but it was one that made him pause. It was addressed in an uneducated hand, with the word "privit" stuck in the left-hand corner, and it bore the New York postmark. Mr. Adderly had few correspondents, and no foreign ones, nor did he recognise the handwriting; yet he guessed who had written this epistle. His gray eyebrows met together, so heavy was his frown, and his mouth became an oval, as though he was about to whistle, which, however, was far from his inten-

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tion. For a moment he held the letter in both hands, as though he would have torn it up without reading it; but in the end he read it.

"DEAR MR. ADDERLY,

"I wanted to begin 'Dear Dick,' but I thort you mightn't like it, and that it was better not." (Perhaps it was better not; but whatever had been written, to judge by the reader's face, it could scarcely have been worse; its expression was venomous.) "Those days are so long ago when I was 'your own Nancy' that you have perhaps almost forgotten them; but I have not. I ain't a-going to carney you." (The word implied conciliation, but the look of it had no such effect upon Mr. Adderly; it only provoked an execration.) "I know that nothing as I could say would move you to tenderness, any more than the sight of me, ill and old and broken, could do it. If you spurned me from your door when I was young and pretty (only you had got tired of me), how much more would you do it now! And I ain't a-going to say anything about

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justice or mercy to a man like you; I know you too well." (Here Mr. Adderly smiled—not, indeed, a genial smile, but approvingly. The writer's frankness pleased him.) "Moreover, I acknolledge that *I* am breaking the agreement as I signed with you when our little one died, and you gave me the money—not much, it wasn't—to come over here. Well, it's gone—almost all of it—and starvation lies before me. You have never known what it is to want a meal, and cannot understand, perhaps, what the fear of coming to such a pass can do with one. Nothing less would have made me write to you, but I must do it. I do not plead for myself, though I might do so, Heaven knows, and *you* know; but you will surely not let the mother of your own child starve. It would take such a very little to keep soul and body together in a poor creature like me, and you could so well spare it. Even if it was to be spent in liquor (as I dare say you think), you might say to yourself, 'I will send it her, for then she will drink herself to death, and be off my hands the quicker.' But any way, though I don't drink

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and eat but very little, for Heaven's sake send it. If you don't—— But there, I will not threaten you. There are times when I feel only hopeless, and others when I feel desperate. What is life to me?" ("Yet she wants to live, it seems," snarled the squire to himself.) "What is death to me? At the worst, a place of punishment; and am I not there now? To think that I was once a child—an innocent, happy child—before I became your plaything, makes a madwoman of me. You had better send me something for both our sakes. If it should be but a ten-pound note, I swear I will never trouble you again this side the grave. With that money I could buy some decent clothes and get employment. Unless I do that I must starve.

"NANCY."

Mr. Adderly read the effusion through his gold spectacles, but was nevertheless compelled to hold it pretty close to him by reason of his failing sight; he had had, as we know, other experiences of the fact that nearness is not necessarily dearness; but

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he had probably never had anything that he hated so much quite so close to his nose. When he finished its perusal he held the letter out at arm's length, as though it had come from an infected house.

"A lying slut!" was the comment upon it he hissed through his closed teeth. "Ten pounds? no, nor ten pennies!" Again he looked as though he was about to tear the letter up, and again he refrained from it. It struck him at first that he would send no answer; but in that case she might suppose that her communication had miscarried, and might write again. He would put a stop to that, at all events; moreover, he felt that it would be a relief to his pent-up indignation to write a line. It was no sentimental composition that he purposed to himself to send, but it took him some time, nevertheless; he tore up half a dozen notes before he wrote one to his liking; but this was what he finally concluded to send—it was brief enough:

"No, not a penny. You have had all that you will ever get from me."

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"The mutton is getting rather cold, sir," observed Perkins; he had rapped twice at the study door without eliciting any reply, and at last had ventured to enter.

It was not the squire's habit to swear at anybody—he preferred to snarl; but on this occasion he indulged himself in a terrific outburst. Mr. Perkins fled incontinently, and immensely increased the hilarity of the dinner-party in the kitchen by the repetition of the oath, and the description of his reception generally. He did not, of course, understand that half the squire's anathema had been provoked by Nancy's letter; a *douceur* had been bestowed upon him which ought by rights to have been shared by another recipient; and the weight and size of the gratuity (considering how little he had done to deserve it) astonished Perkins.

Nevertheless, when in a few minutes the squire rang for his luncheon, he wore his usual air. There was no trace of the tempest of passion that had so lately swept over him—at all events, on the surface. In the depths of the ocean of remembrance the mud

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had been stirred up. The sins of our youth are often repented of—more often, perhaps, called to mind with a certain shameless satisfaction; we roll the sweet morsel under our tongue; but neither of these ways was the squire's way. He neither repented nor enjoyed. He was only filled with fury at the thought of this "abandoned woman"—as he actually regarded her, without reflecting who had abandoned her—having had the impudence to appeal to him for money after she had entered into a legal engagement to the contrary. However, he had now settled that matter for good and all. His answer was in the post-bag, and if he was not quite himself again, he looked so.

His thoughts reverted to that scheme of benevolence which had occupied them before Nancy's letter had come—a union between his niece Martha and Mr. George Waldron. It would be an excellent thing for the young woman, and would save him fifty pounds a year. It is curious how one generous action, or even idea, begets another; the plan that had so suddenly entered into his head for the

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benefit of Martha now suggested a similar arrangement for Mary. Why should not the Rev. Æneas Harden marry *her?* His thoughts had hitherto not much dwelt upon marrying or giving in marriage; but it was strange that he had not entertained this notion before. He would probably have to provide the trousseau in both cases; but a ten-pound note—the very sum that Nancy had written for—would be ample for that purpose. At present his relations were a little strained with the vicar, because of the matter of the periwinkles on the foreshore; but his claim upon that marine property—though absolute and undeniable—was not worth very much, perhaps twenty shillings a year; if he gave it up in a generous and philanthropic spirit, it would doubtless win the parson's heart, and pave the way for Mary to the altar. He had no doubt that the same method he had already put in practice with George Waldron, and which he felt sure would bear good results, would be equally efficacious with Æneas Harden. In that case he would clear ninety-nine pounds a year. The man was a parson, it is true,

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which of itself, in Mr. Adderly's opinion, augured small intelligence; but he couldn't be such a born fool as not to perceive the possible advantage of being connected by marriage with the owner of Natchett Hall. Yes, he would take an opportunity of inviting Mary to take a seat in his carriage some day when the vicar should be a witness of that act of condescension. Then both his nieces would be provided for, and he should save a hundred pounds a year.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE JUT.

THE path over the cliff from Natchett to Hendon Head is a noble one, and the spirit must be depressed indeed which the views from it fail to please. When the mind is melancholy, the effects of inland beauty are rather apt to minister to its sombre mood; but the fresh air of the sea upon the cliff-top is almost always invigorating. Mary Vance found it to be so, when once she had started with her sister upon their expedition. Had she looked back, the sight of the Castle might have suggested the friendly roof that lay beneath it, and revived the cause of her regret; but she had had enough of looking back. Martha's tone, when she had inquired what she was looking for, had been unmistakably sharp, and she herself had a secret consciousness that she deserved it. Her eyes were now

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directed seawards, to the red-sailed fishing smacks, all homeward bound in anticipation of rough weather, though there was scarcely a cloud on the horizon, and to the colliers, which, under steam, little heeded the "spite of wind or tide"; and now forwards to the majestic head, with the long ridge of rock projecting from its base, on which, even at so great a distance, and with the rising gale in the opposite quarter, they could already hear the beat of the ceaseless waves. Above them the shrieking gulls were "blown about the sky" like snowflakes.

"We shall be hardly able to hold our sketch-books on the Jut to-day," said Mary.

"Oh yes, we shall; I know of a big rock with seats of stone beneath it, where we shall be in shelter," answered Martha. She was speaking the truth, no doubt; but in any case, since she had proposed the Jut as the object of their walk, she would have gone there; her disposition was masterful, and when she had once made up her mind to anything it was difficult to move her. When thwarted, she resented it bitterly; no one except her uncle—and

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his doing so was no small factor in the sum of her dislike of him—ever did thwart her. Mary always gave in to the least opposition, which explained what was rather a matter of surprise to some of their friends—how well the two sisters "got on" together.

Walking in the direction they were going was difficult. The wind, which was at their backs, was so powerful that it almost compelled them to run, and when they reached Hendon Head it was not easy to keep their feet. The Bloomer costume would have been a great advantage to the young ladies, nor could it have been objected to in their case upon the ground of disclosing more of the human form. But, fortunately, there were no spectators. Natchett was a couple of miles away on one side of the Head, and on the other was Hendon Bay with its single cottage. Its inmate, a fisherman, was within doors, and his boat, moored to the shore, was rocking on the little waves like a cradle. For the Head and the Jut between them sheltered the bay from the north so completely that the sea

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to right and left presented the most curious contrast: on the one side the waves were lashed to fury; on the other they leapt and laughed in the sun, like children at play. But the thunder of the surf against the Jut overhung them both and drowned the roar even of the wind.

"How glad I am we came!" exclaimed Martha at the top of her voice (any ordinary mode of speech would have been useless). "What a magnificent spectacle!"

Poor Mary, who had no breath to spare, and who was secretly in some alarm at the gigantic "effects," regardless of expense, Nature was producing, only nodded her little head in assent; she was thinking of the steep path that led down to the Jut, where, though they would be partially protected from the gale—for gale it was by this time—their footing would be less secure. Perhaps Martha had thought of it too, and passed that eulogy on the scenery to anticipate opposition and any weak proposal to turn back. It was really a nasty place to get down in such weather, especially with their

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sketch-books and sandwich bags; for though the Misses Vance had been likened to fawns, they had nothing in common with the chamois. They had to use their hands almost as much as their feet. At the bottom there was a narrow but deep gully, at present quite dry, and tolerably sheltered by great rocks.

"Don't you think it will be better to stop here, dear?" said Mary nervously.

"Here? Why, how is one to sketch?" inquired Martha imperiously. It is fair to say that she had helped her weaker sister down the cliff, and therefore, perhaps, felt in a position to exert her authority. "We might as well sit in a ditch. We must get on to the Jut, of course. What can you be thinking about?"

"I was thinking of Pharaoh and all his host being engulfed in the Red Sea," answered Mary; "this is just the kind of place that the Egyptians——"

"Rubbish!" ejaculated Martha, cutting short the

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historical parallel. "Here, give me your hand, and then follow me."

She climbed up the rocky wall on to the Jut, and pulled her sister after her, and then led the way under the huge boulders, which afforded them some shelter, to the great hollowed rock she had in view. It was really a very pleasant spot to sit in, and well protected from wind and spray. Behind them the waves raged and roared; before them lay the sparkling bay, with its one house or hut, ready to be transferred to paper.

"This is capital!" cried Martha, seating herself on a flat stone, and producing her sketching materials. "Perhaps you will trust to me another time."

The observation was characteristic, for Mary had not uttered a word that implied want of faith; but for opposition, even of a negative kind, her sister had a keen eye, and she had detected signs of at least unwillingness in the other's manner.

"What on earth are you looking at your watch for?" she added hastily.

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"Only to know how long we shall have in this delightful spot," returned Mary, with a show of enthusiasm.

"Oh, hours!" replied Martha, in a mollified tone. "You needn't fidget about that. The tide has only just turned. We could have three hours for sketching; but since I see you are as nervous as a kitten, we will only take two."

"There's a dear," said Mary, much relieved. "Do not let us run any risk. I confess I'm a dreadful coward."

"Well, don't confess it to anybody else. I should be sorry for Mr. George Waldron, for example, to think that my sister was a coward."

"Why?" inquired Mary quickly—for her, indeed, almost sharply. The other's remark had grated upon her. What could it signify to Martha, was the question that occurred to her, what sort of opinion Mr. Waldron entertained of her?

"Well, only that he is so very heroic," answered Martha, with an uncomfortable laugh.

"The very last man in the world, nevertheless, I

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should think, not to make allowances for a woman's weakness," was Mary's rejoinder.

"That is fortunate, for with such a reputation as he brings home with him, no doubt he will find women very weak. What you say, however, is true, Mary. He is really a fine fellow; so modest and unassuming, too. I like him."

Mary busied herself with her sketch-book, and answered nothing. Her sister's words at first had frightened her, because they had seemed to impute the weakness they spoke of to herself; relieved from that impression, it then struck her that they had a certain air of proprietorship in the person they eulogized. It was natural enough, indeed, that her sister (or anyone else) should praise him; even the phrase "I like him" might, in the mouth of another girl, have had no particular significance; but Martha was not given to such confessions. To Mary's ears it almost amounted to a claim. "Notice. This eligible young gentleman is my private property. Trespassers beware. Signed, Martha Vance, spinster." A most unwarranted and illegal pretension, of

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course, but one which filled her with vague alarm. What was ominous, and a proof of the strong impression that George Waldron had made upon her, she was unconscious of anything unnatural in this state of feeling as regarded herself. She took it as a matter of course. She did not think it strange that she should be jealous of Martha, or apprehensive of her rivalry. It even suddenly struck her that her sister might have proposed their present expedition to prevent her seeing George when he called at the Cottage that afternoon, which she felt sure he would do. She had always succumbed to Martha, without even a struggle; but there were some things—or, at all events, one thing—which she would not put up with. She felt indignant and rebellious—no, not rebellious, for this was a matter in which Martha could claim no authority.

Her silence did not seem to embarrass her sister, who on her part, too, was apparently disinclined for conversation. Paint-brush in hand, she was looking thoughtfully at Hendon Bay, but without transferring its beauties to her sketch-book. Her last words had

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been "I like him." What was she thinking about? Mary wondered.

Presently they both began to paint, exchanging a word or two now and then upon the subject of their work. The amateur is, in one respect at least, on a level with a professional artist—that if he takes interest in his task, it enthrals him. There is no recipe for passing time, as regards quickness, like painting a picture, except, perhaps, writing a story. While one is at it, the enemy flies, and one takes no notice. The two girls were conscious, of course, that the hungry waves were leaping up behind them; but they were well accustomed to the "dreadful diapason of the sea," and though its thunder was louder than they had ever heard it, it had no disturbing effect. They had often been on the Jut before, and knew its ways. Suddenly, however, something seemed to strike the very rock itself that sheltered them, and a shower of spray fell upon Mary's sketch-book.

"Good heavens!" she cried, "is that the tide?"

Martha turned pale and drew out her watch.

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"We have stayed longer than I intended," she said, a little hastily; "but we have still a good half-hour to spare!"

"We have not half a minute!" cried Mary wildly. She had climbed up the rock, and looked behind them so far as the blinding spray permitted her to look. The Jut was almost covered by the waves. The occupation in which they had been engaged, or perhaps their reflections on another theme, had prevented them from noticing that the tide, with the wind's help, was coming in much more quickly than usual. The rock had been their shelter, indeed, but a most treacherous one, and was only too likely to prove their gravestone.

Hand in hand—for to stand alone, much more to move, in the face of the gale that was now blowing, was almost impossible—the two girls threaded their way, as quickly as they could, among the great boulders; but they now found themselves opposed by another element: the spray was blown in blinding sheets, and where the way had before been dry there were already great pools—not as yet the off-

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spring of the incoming tide, but water torn from the tops of the waves—through which they had to wade. It was difficult to see before them through the flying foam; but they pressed onward with desperate haste towards the Head, the summit of which was a landmark that could not be mistaken. The question which each put to herself was, Was the gully between it and them still passable? But in their sinking hearts they knew that it was not. The tide was wont to sweep through it like a millrace, long before it reached the rocks they were now passing, and which were already half surrounded by the sea. The prospect—literally the prospect—before them was terrible. All the features of it, which, had they been in safety, two hundred yards at most to the westward, would have caused their admiration, had assumed a menacing and abhorrent air. Nature had become terrible to them, for she was hungry for their lives. The threatening thunder of the surf; the malignant hiss of the wave as it drew back to gather volume for another onslaught; the blue sky that smiled so contemptuously upon their pitiful

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case—these were never afterwards forgotten, nor, as it were, forgiven. "Nature is all very charming," Martha used afterwards to say when exhorted to admire scenery, "but not when she wants to kill you."

What appalled the poor girls most, however, was their utter loneliness; the sight of a fellow-creature upon Hendon Head, even though it could have been of no possible help to them, would have given them spirit. The absence of all human sympathy paralyzed their energies. As they drew near to the end of the Jut, their worst fears became realized. They could hear the rush of the incoming stream rising above the general roar of the waves; they could even see the wild water above the rocky walls of the gully, proclaiming that it was full; but at the same time they saw something else: a dripping form emerge from the gully itself, and run gesticulating towards them.

"Back, back," it cried, "for your lives! The tide is in; make for the higher ground."

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CHAPTER X.

A RUN FOR LIFE.

THE girls turned at once and obeyed the man.

Whoever it was who had thus swum or waded through the flood to their aid would have earned the right of being obeyed. But though he looked little like himself, bare-headed, his hair tousled by the wind, dripping wet from head to foot, and, above all, with a terror in his face they had never thought to see there, they both recognised him at a glance.

"What other man in the world," thought Mary, "at such a supreme moment, could possibly have stepped in between them and death except George Waldron?"

He led the way, or rather pressed them on, giving his assistance now to one and now to the other, to the rock from which they had started, and

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almost without a word. They placed themselves unquestioningly in his hands, feeling that he would do what was best, though his course of action was unintelligible to them. Why were they going over the same ground again, and in the direction opposite to that in which safety lay, while every moment was so valuable to them? Yet, even if it was lost time, they were conscious that without his help they could not have stood against the wind or sea, far less have retraced their steps without the occasional assistance of his powerful arm. The gale was at its height, and not only the foam of the waves, but huge portions of the waves themselves were flung at them. Mary would have fallen more than once if the young fellow had not been close beside her; in some places where the pools were deep he even lifted her up and carried her a few paces. Then he would return and hold out his hand to her struggling sister. To both of them his doing this seemed the most natural thing in the world. Death was beckoning them too nearly and too impatiently to admit of their noting these de-

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partures from the rules of convention, and yet, so far as Mary, at least, was concerned, the experience was not one of unmixed apprehension. She had the fullest confidence in this man, who had shown such courage and conduct in scenes no less terrible than the present. The sound of his voice, though it uttered but words of warning, was pleasant to her; the clasp of his hand not only gave her courage, but a vague delight.

They were once more in the hollow of the rock they had quitted only a few minutes before; their sketch-books lay where they had left them, and so complete was the shelter it afforded, even a torn leaf from one of them remained by its side, though it had not escaped the spray.

"You must remain here till I come for you," said the young man earnestly. "Whatever happens, do not be frightened; you will, at all events, be safer here than anywhere."

"You are surely not going to leave us, Mr. Waldron?" exclaimed Martha reproachfully. His

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company had rallied her strength and spirits, as in her sister's case, but she had not the same unreasoning confidence in him. To lose him seemed to lose all.

"I am not going to desert you," he answered gently, "if that is what you mean, Miss Martha; but leave you I must; there is nothing left but to swim for it."

"And we cannot swim," exclaimed Martha. The young fellow looked at Mary and lifted his eyebrows.

"He is going for the boat, Martha," she answered for him.

"Yes, that is our only chance," he said, rewarding his partisan with a smile. "I shall keep my sand-shoes on, so that when I reach the shore I can run along the rocks; you will be able to watch me the whole way, and you will see that I shall run faster than the tide."

In an instant he had thrown off coat and waist-

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coat and plunged into the bay; it was still comparatively calm, for none of the waves from the north side of the Jut had as yet mingled with it; and it would not have been difficult for him to have reached the fisherman's hut by swimming; but time was now everything, and five minutes either way would mean life or death. Indeed, though nothing he had done had been done in a hurry or without forethought, he had not, in fact, wasted a moment. The history of his presence on the Jut is easily explained. He had called at the Cottage, as Mary's heart had presaged, and was told whither the young ladies had gone, and needing, as he said to himself, a walk after a pretty hearty luncheon, he thought he would take the same excursion.

It had been one very familiar to him of old, and the place was not given to change; in spite of the terrible assaults of wind and tide, the rocky promontory, save for the shifting of the boulders, was much the same as when, years ago, he had swept its glassy pools, fringed with seaweed, with his prawn-net. His boyish mind had eagerly welcomed

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and retained all the fishermen had told him of the Jut. He knew what ships had gone to pieces upon it; what adventurous persons had been caught by the tide and drowned there; and all its incidents and peculiarities. As he noticed the rising force of the gale, it also struck him that the tide would rise before it more rapidly than under ordinary circumstances, and that for this the young ladies might not make sufficient allowance. His mind had been already occupied with them, or with one of them, more or less, throughout his walk, and this hint of danger caused them to monopolize it.

If they had not already reached the gully that lay beneath the mainland and the Jut it would be difficult for them to do so without assistance. This thought, though he was already walking quickly, made him quicken his steps. From the top of the Head he could see their slanting figures making their slow way against the wind; it was just possible, not indeed that they would be in time to pass the gully dryshod, but that with his help they might be enabled to wade through it; and with this end in

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view he had dashed down the steep path, to find, as we have seen, that their retreat was already cut off. He could make his way, though by no means easily, to them; but it was impossible that they could come to him. And then it would have been better, and saved priceless time, if he started for the boat of which he was now in quest at once; he dared not, however, leave the girls to retrace their steps upon the Jut, on which every sea, where it was unprotected by the great boulders, was now breaking with frightful violence; nor, indeed, by reason of the roar of the stream, could he have given them the requisite advice from the other side of it.

What he had now to do was to swim to the nearest landing-place in Hendon Bay beyond the gully, and then make his way along the shore to where the boat was lying. This last he did at full speed, at the same time waving his wide-awake in his hand to attract the attention of the fisherman. The two girls whose lives were dependent upon his quickness of foot were, as he had told them would be the case, the witnesses of his endeavours for

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their rescue; he had purposely informed them of the fact with a definite object. He knew that the ordeal before them was of the severest kind—that of suspense—and he wished to fix their attention on the brightest side of the picture. When danger is thundering at our doors, it is comfort indeed to know that rescue is on the road; and the sisters were so placed that, if it only came in time, they would see it coming.

At present, however, that prospect was far from encouraging. They saw the young fellow breast the waves and reach the shore with a speed that only a skilled swimmer could have used; but, like all proceedings in the water to those who watch them from the shore, his movements seemed slow and tedious. Had it been low tide, he would have then had the level sand to run upon; but this was now covered by the waves, and he had to make his way as best he could along the slippery rocks and seaweed. Never was a case so urgent to which, at the same time, the proverb "More haste less speed" was so applicable, since a false step might mean a

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sprained ankle, and a sprained ankle would certainly have involved the loss of two lives.

The sisters sat side by side, watching the scene with an interest of which the mere playgoer can form no estimate, since the result of the drama concerned not so much the *dramatis persona* as themselves.

"How slowly he runs!" murmured Martha complainingly.

"He only looks to do so, because he is already so far off," said Mary. "It is so hard to keep one's footing upon those wet green stones. I am sure he is doing his very best for us."

"Let us hope so. Still, *he* is safe enough, whatever happens. I think it would have been more manly in him not to have left us."

"Martha, for shame!" cried her sister vehemently. "But for Mr. Waldron we should both have been drowned by this time. For my part, at all events, I could not have made my way back here against the

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wind and sea. What good could he have done by staying here? Does not our only hope lie, as he explained to us, in the boat yonder coming to fetch us off in time?"

Novelists and others often tell us that there is an instinct which informs even the soundest sleeper when any individual intrudes upon his privacy—"the mysterious consciousness that we are not alone"—but against this great convenience must be set the obstinate stupidity with which people in country places ignore all attempts of their fellow-creatures to gain their attention. If the cabman kept no brighter look-out about him than the bumpkin, or the boatman (on land), his fares would be few indeed.

To Roger Leeson, the only dweller in Hendon Bay, the feats of wind and wave, however majestical, were nothing new, and, so long as he and his boat were out of reach of their malice, had no sort of interest for him. He knew that folks came from Natchett, and even farther, to see the white water cover the Jut on stormy days, and the knowledge of

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it increased his self-respect. It was a proof of the mental inferiority of landsmen and landswomen to seafaring folk, who were attracted by no such cheap and common exhibitions, but devoted themselves when at leisure to tobacco and philosophic reflection. These visitors were often inlanders, and made "a mort o' noise, only the roar of the waves drownded it." As Roger left his net-mending for a moment and came to his door to look at the weather, he noticed one of those very visitors, "jumping and capering with his hat off" (as he afterwards described the incident) "as though no one but himself had ever seen the tide come through the gully, and the foam start out at the blow-hole."

If he wanted ginger-beer Roger could supply him with it, for he kept a stock of that luxury for that express purpose, and it was probable that so much jumping and shouting would cause the gentleman to feel dry, which would be the better for trade. If he expected Roger Leeson to take the ginger-beer to *him*, as some did, at twopence a bottle, without some extra charge for carriage, he

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did not know Roger, and was never more mistaken in his life. However, the young fellow was a good 'un to run, at all events, for Roger well knew those slippery stones; only why should he be coming *away* from the Jut, just as all the fun (as most landlubbers thought it) was at its height, instead of staying to watch it? Was it possible—— Here Roger snatched up his telescope (the only article besides the ginger-beer he dealt in, and loaned to visitors at "a penny a squint"), and took a long and steady glance at the Jut itself. Then he rushed at his boat and addressed his head and shoulders to the task of launching it through the wet sand with an energy he had never before expended. It moved but slowly, and just as he had got it to the water's edge, the stranger whose movements he had been watching with such contemptuous indifference came up to him, still at full speed, but with labouring chest.

There was no contempt in Roger's countenance now as he held up his horny hand for silence, but, on the contrary, a keen admiration.

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"Don't waste another ounce of breath," he exclaimed, "but jump in. I know what the matter is well enough without your telling, and would to Heaven I had known it five minutes earlier! You're a good plucked one if ever there was one, but you must take the tiller. We shall do it quicker that way, until you get your wind again. You see yonder big stone upon the Jut—steer straight for it."

This speech was full of wisdom; Waldron had pointed, panting, to one of the oars, but the demand he had already made upon his breath and strength rendered him for the present in that respect a useless ally. The task now given him he could perform, while at the same time it permitted him to recover himself. His exertions had been prodigious. His breath came in great sobs, and the veins in his forehead stood out like whip-cord; but there was a passionate anxiety and terror in his eyes, which appealed still more to the sympathy of his companion.

"Don't trouble to open your lips, my lad," he said, as he threw his full strength into the oars;

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"but just move your head for 'yes' and 'no' while I ask you a question or two. There are only two of them—with petticoats—so far as I could make out, in peril of their lives yonder: is that so? Good! the fewer the better. Before," continued Roger, with a glance at the other's garments, "you took to the water, did you not tell them to stay under the Big Stone till they were fetched, whatever happened? Well, of course you did, like a man of sense. Then, please God, we shall find them there."

The boat, considering its size, progressed with rapidity in answer to Roger's powerful strokes, till the roar of the surf sounded like those peals of thunder of which we say, "It is breaking over our heads."

"Are you steering right for the Stone?" inquired Roger presently, at the top of his voice.

"I was a moment ago," replied Waldron, in agonized tones; "but now I can see nothing but surf and sea."

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"Then keep her head straight, and hold on," said Roger, and in two strokes the boat grounded on the Jut, amid a shower of foam and spray which hid all things from their eyes.

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CHAPTER XI.

SAVED.

It is said, and truly, that the being brought face to face with death—even in the case of one not dear to us, and much more, of course, when the sense of impending loss is added to other dread reflections—is the most serious impression of which human life is capable. Even the sick-room, to one unused to sickness, and who is introduced to its surroundings for the first time, is an experience not easily forgotten. The gulf between rich and poor is broad and deep enough, but it can be bridged over by successful energy, some fortunate accident, or the scrape of a pen; and in a few weeks or months he who has passed over it forgets that he has done so; it seems to him that he has always been, so to speak, on the safe side. Health and disease stand much more widely apart from one an-

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other. The habitual invalid dwells in another world from that of his more fortunate fellow-creatures, and when they visit him for the first time, they become for the first time aware of it. When the sick-room is the chamber of death, this difference is still more accentuated for us. We feel as we never felt before, and will never feel again till it comes to our own turn to die. When that happens, life wears a different aspect indeed for us, yet one that, except in rare cases, we have been more or less prepared for. The usual method of meeting with "the shadow feared of man" is like the coming nearer and nearer up a long straight road of an acquaintance whose features gradually become familiar to us before he takes us by the hand. But sometimes we meet Death literally face to face, upon a sudden, and when, as the phrase goes, he is "the last person we should have dreamt of meeting." This was the experience that now presented itself to Martha and Mary Vance.

They had, however, a little while to wait, which, brief as it was, appeared protracted, as time does

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in which events, or even emotions, are closely packed. To the younger her fate seemed sad and strange, to the elder cruel; but in neither was there any of that panic terror which, under like circumstances, sometimes overwhelms both man and woman, as though death were some punishment they have deserved. The reflection that she was the cause of their common calamity—that the expedition had been her own proposal, and that she had despised her sister's apprehensions about venturing upon the Jut at all—more than once forced itself upon Martha's mind, but she resolutely, almost defiantly, put it aside; she could not bring herself to say, "It was my wilfulness, dear Mary, that has brought us to this pass." It would only have given Mary pain, had she done so; but it was not the knowledge of that fact which kept her silent. She was angry with herself, but still more bitter against the severity of the penalty which her masterfulness had incurred. While there was hope of rescue, while it seemed possible that George Waldron could attract in time the attention of the boatman, the two sisters, with

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hand clasped in hand, conversed with one another in subdued tones, which their proximity, and the shelter still afforded them by the rock beneath which they sat, permitted them to do, notwithstanding the thunder of the rising tide; but as the waters gathered about them, and the figure so slowly nearing the fisherman's hut seemed incapable of attracting his attention, they gave themselves up for lost, and spoke no more. Once, indeed, through the clouds of spray which now began to obscure their vision, Mary thought she saw the boat upon its way.

"He is coming!" she exclaimed, with feverish joy; but even as she spoke a creamy wave overtopped, for the first time, their sheltering rock, and, as it drenched them to the skin, seemed to thunder, "He comes too late!" The water, though as yet to no great depth, had already swirled in between them and the bay; and huddled together in a hollow of the Giant Stone, as it was called, they awaited their doom. They were neither of them, as the phrase goes, wanting in devotion, but with the elder sister's prayers mingled (as happens, doubtless, to most of

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us in our last moments) many mundane thoughts; it is but natural in one still of this world, though only for so brief a span, since we have hitherto dwelt in no other; she had even noted that her sister had said, "He is coming," instead of "The boat is coming." True, such things mattered not now, but still she noted it. She even reflected—if a flash of thought can be called reflection—that the fate of herself and sister would relieve Uncle Adderly of a pecuniary burthen, and be a distinct satisfaction to him; but mostly she thought of those she liked, and pictured how they would miss her. As for Mary, who was about to be her companion to the land of shadows, she seemed, as she embraced her, to be part of herself, and excluded from the category of survivors; in death, it would indeed be said of them that they were not divided. Mary, too, though her mind was cast in a more religious mould, was not so overwhelmed by the contemplation of the mysterious and appalling change that was awaiting her but that something of earth still touched it.

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"How sorry he will be, poor fellow," she once murmured softly to herself, "that, though he did his best, it was unavailing!"

What did Nature care—the Nature we are so fond of eulogizing in our arm-chairs—for those poor helpless girls? The wind lashed their pale faces, and seemed to triumph over their dumb despair; the waves, like ten thousand devils, leapt at them with hungry cries, and climbed and swirled and screamed for their defenceless prey. Above them was already spread a winding-sheet of spray and foam, which hid them from all eyes, and had caused George Waldron to exclaim, "I cannot see where the Big Stone stands!"

Nor could he; but Roger Leeson knew, though he could not see, and that beneath it lay the only stretch, or rather slip, of sand, free from huge jagged rocks and possible for a boat to land at, on all the Jut. To have missed it by half a foot would have been shipwreck, but the brave barque *Emma Jane* (of Hendon), true to her tiller, and urged by his strong arms, kept right on, and missed it not,

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but buried her bow in the wet sand so deep that she was for the moment anchored.

And thus it happened that Martha, being nearest to the waters of the bay, was suddenly snatched up and carried by she knew not whom, save that it was not the pale messenger she had expected, and placed in Waldron's arms. He took her gently but mechanically, and with wild eyes cried out something, to which Roger replied roughly, "Bide where you are;" and in a trice he had brought out Mary and placed her by her sister's side, and the boat was off, with a foot of water in her, but without leaving her bones, as many a finer craft had done before her, upon Hendon Jut.

The two poor girls were still in evil case; wet, white, and almost inanimate, they sat propped up by cushions (for the *Emma Jane* was, on occasion, a pleasure-boat) in the stern; but they were conscious of their preservation, and murmured forth their thanks to God and man.

"Don't you trouble to talk, ladies," said Roger, taking off his pea-jacket and laying it carefully over

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them. "There will be time for that when we have got you within doors and given you a sup of whisky."

Waldron had not even a jacket to offer them, and feeling, though his heart was full of tenderness and pity for them, that the fisherman's advice was good, addressed his conversation, as he steered, to Roger only.

"You are a right good fellow," he said earnestly; "and both these ladies are well aware that they owe their lives to you."

"Tut, tut! my boat and me would never have been nigh them in time, but for your running and hollering; I never seed a man make his way among they boulders as you did; it was touch and go, however, even as it was, that's the truth. 'Twas lucky as I know my way almost in the dark about the Big Stone; he's gone, you see, now, tall as he is, along with the rest of them."

He nodded as he spoke towards the Jut, and Waldron turned to look at it; the girls, too, though it cost them an effort, glanced back at the scene of

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their late peril with awestruck eyes. Not one of all those thousand rocks, not an inch of foothold for man or beast, was visible; the whole promontory was now a mass of yeasty waves, which, passing over the rocky barrier, roused the calm waters of the bay to tumult. Between the boat and the shore, however, the sea was scarcely rougher than before, and the *Emma Jane* soon accomplished her voyage. Though wet and shivering, the two sisters had by that time almost recovered themselves, and were able to walk to the hut without assistance. Unhappily, as Roger had no wife, there were no dry clothes for them, nor was there any fire. Waldron felt that it would be wiser for them, even in the teeth of the wind which was still raging, to push on to Natchett, than to wait, in their dripping garments, till a vehicle could be sent for them.

To this they assented, asserting, as women do when about to run a risk, that "they were sure it would not hurt them," and dropping some words of pity for their companion, who was as wet as themselves, and had neither coat nor waistcoat.

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"I am used to wear still less in India," he answered laughingly; "and my clothes I gladly leave to Neptune in acknowledgment of our preservation; but I regret for Roger's sake"—the fisherman had gone into some inner room to fetch the whisky—"that with my coat I have lost my note-case, so that I can make no immediate return to him for his good services to us. Let us hope he will credit us with good intentions."

"Here is your note-case," said Mary shyly, "and also your watch and chain, the loss of which you omitted to mention. It was not a pretty thing to do, but I rifled your pockets."

"It was a very wise and thoughtful thing to do," returned the young man earnestly. "There are very few people who, when their own lives are in peril, would concern themselves about the property of others. There must have seemed very little hope at one time of your having the opportunity of returning it to me."

"There seemed to be none, but still there was a chance that you might get it," said Mary simply.

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He looked at her with admiration mingled with distress. It horrified him, unselfish as the act had been, that she should have looked such a contingency in the face as the recovery of these things from her dead body. Martha kept silence; it struck her that her sister must have used a good deal of secrecy in rifling (as she had called it) George Waldron's pockets. She, too, thought it strange that such an idea should have entered her sister's mind, but also significant.

"Now, ladies, here is the whisky!" exclaimed Roger, entering with bottle and glass. "A sup of it will do you all the good in the world."

This is a eulogium often passed on that spirit (famed for its neatness). For my part, I think it ought to do one good, upon the same principle which leads us to expect virtue in an ugly woman.

Neither Martha nor Mary had ever tasted anything so filthy in their lives; but as this prescription of Dr. Roger Leeson was backed by the advice of Mr. George Waldron (called in in consultation), there was nothing for it but to swallow the dose.

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"If you would come with us, and help the ladies to get along against the wind, Roger, it would be a good plan, I think," suggested George, at starting.

"Most certainly, sir. I'd carry 'em pick-a-back with a willing heart, if it were thirty miles instead of three."

An observation partly dictated, no doubt, by natural chivalry, but also by the transference of something out of George Waldron's note-case to his own pocket—an acknowledgment in black and white of the great service he had rendered the young ladies, and very appropriately ornamented with a watermark.

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CHAPTER XII.

THE ENRAGED PHYSICIAN.

THE ease with which some men and women accommodate themselves to a change of fortune—if it be for the better—is very remarkable; and it is accompanied by so brief a thankfulness as may well provoke the anger of the gods. To say that the gratitude of Martha Vance had evaporated before her garments had dried would have been paying it a much higher compliment than it deserved, for they were not dry when she took them off, and in that long and disagreeable walk home her mind was already occupied by quite other matters than her recent preservation. She had the advantage of the assistance of Roger Leeson's stalwart arm, but even for that, I fear, she was not thankful. She was thinking mainly of the other couple, progressing behind her with more difficulty, but with a greater

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mutual satisfaction. There were subsequent events in Martha's life which threw a doubt upon the suggestion that she had ever entertained any serious thoughts of winning the affections of George Waldron; she had seen him, as we know, but once since his boyhood, and her nature was hardly one of those that permits itself the dangerous luxury of love at first sight; her feelings had certainly received no crushing blow, but her *amour-propre* had as certainly been wounded. It had but very vaguely entered her mind that if she could persuade Mary to marry the vicar, and could secure George Waldron for herself, it would be a very convenient arrangement for all parties, but it *had* entered it; and when she had planned out anything, however roughly, she resented its failure. She had the sagacity, however, to know when she had failed, and in the present case she was thoroughly convinced of it.

Mary had unconsciously revealed her secret to her, when they were passing what they believed to be their last hours on earth upon Hendon Jut; but it was possible that even that circumstance would

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not have prevented Martha from pursuing her object; if she had happened to have thought of securing the young fellow's valuables, instead of her sister—a practical idea which ought by rights to have occurred to her—she would have fought with her for the prize of the man himself; but Mary's forethought had, of course, given her an immense advantage; moreover—which really settled the question—it was clear to Martha, from George Waldron's manner, that he preferred her sister to herself. Nothing could be kinder than the solicitude he showed upon her own account; but, still, there was a tenderness in his behaviour towards Mary the significance of which no woman could fail to see. Of course Mary had had great luck as regarded precipitating matters; that hour on Hendon Jut had been equal to a month of the opportunities of love-making such as ordinary life afforded; but, at all events, it had been accomplished—the thing was done. Martha Vance acknowledged it to herself without so much as a sigh—she was much too sensible a young woman to cry over spilt milk; but for all that she did not like

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Mr. George Waldron so well as she had done a couple of hours ago. If she had been inclined to think of him too tenderly, it was only right and proper that this change should have occurred; but we have no proof that she had so thought of him—the fact is simply recorded because it was destined to have a serious influence upon more than one character in our story. Whether it was a case of the grapes being sour or not, she certainly from this time began to entertain a much less high opinion of the young man than she had done. This change in her relations to him caused her to regard her Uncle Adderly with a greater detestation than ever; she had much disliked his vulgar attempt that morning to throw her at George Waldron's head, but the idea of having to tell him (as she must sooner or later do) that George had chosen her sister, instead of herself, was a reflection so bitter and humiliating that it seemed to turn her blood to gall.

Gratitude for her preservation was no longer, as has been said, in Martha's mind; but even if the subject had been brought to her notice, it is possible

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that she might have defended herself upon the ground that she had not so very much to be thankful for after all.

With Mary, on the other hand, the case was wholly different. She was as grateful for the mercy that had been vouchsafed to her as she had been an hour or so ago, when, in the humid darkness, an unknown arm had been thrown around her and had borne her away to light and life. Nay, the life she had regained seemed now even more worth the living to her than it had done when she was on the very verge of quitting it. She was wet; she was weary; her limbs could scarcely carry her fragile body upon its homeward way; but she was intensely happy. Love had suddenly beautified her life, and rendered it precious to her. It had mingled with it before, but almost unconsciously, and without reasonable justification; but now it had received recognition, and not only from herself. Though not a word had been spoken of it, she felt in every fibre of her frame that it was reciprocated by the beloved object. In the tone of his voice, in the glance of his eye,

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in the gentle pressure of the strong arm that was helping her on her way, and even in his silence, she read that George Waldron loved her. She had not, as her sister had done, hitherto resented or despised her lot in life, nor did she resent it now; but compared with her present experience of existence it seemed to have become dwarfed and narrowed; it was almost as difficult to believe that a flower could do without the gracious rain and the sunshine as that existence could be endured without George Waldron's love. It could indeed be said of her that

> "Love took up the glass of Time, and turned it in its glowing hands;
> Every moment lightly shaken ran itself in golden sands,"

though any member of the faculty more versed in physical than in spiritual matters, and looking at her from a professional point of view, would have taken anything but a roseate view of her present condition; and, in fact, this actually occurred: for just as she was taking leave of her companion at the door

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of the Cottage, Dr. Gray, on his brown cob, pulled up at the sight of them, with a "Good heavens! Miss Mary, what has happened to you?" and without even waiting to have his question answered, ordered her off, in his most dictatorial manner, to bed.

"Why, she is wet to the skin, sir!" he angrily exclaimed to George Waldron (as if that gentleman had been playing on her with a garden engine as a practical joke); and even when he learnt how the thing had happened, his wrath, though it took a more reasonable direction, remained unmollified. The indignation of a good doctor at the indiscretion of a favourite patient, when he can lay the blame on somebody else, is a noble spectacle, and the young man admired him for it, while he trembled.

"What business has a girl like that" (meaning one with so delicate a constitution) "to be on Hendon Jut on such a day as this!" It was one of Miss Martha's proposals—just because Providence and common-sense were against it, and she would not be beaten by them—he would lay a penny. One would really think she wanted to *kill* her sister!

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"But I hope, Dr. Gray, you don't apprehend Miss Mary has taken any harm," murmured her late companion anxiously.

"I apprehend she will have taken *cold,* sir, and that in her case means harm," replied the doctor emphatically. "If your sister Maggie had been in charge of an invalid, do you think she'd have been such a——"

Here the window of Miss Martha's bedroom, which looked to the front, was closed with a loud snap, and fortunately rendered the rest of the sentence inaudible.

"Why, you're like a drowned rat yourself, Waldron!" continued the doctor, with professional solicitude, as the young fellow walked beside the other's cob towards The Crag. "You must change at once, and take a glass of something hot."

"Oh, never mind *me,*" returned Waldron impatiently. "You will call at the Cottage later on, will you not, doctor? And perhaps you will kindly permit me to look in upon you for five minutes in

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the evening, to get your report. You see, I feel myself in some sort responsible"——

"For having saved the girls' lives," put in the doctor.

"Nay, that was Roger Leeson's doing. But perhaps I ought not to have let her walk home."

"The best thing she could have done, where bad was the best. Don't fret yourself on that account."

"But you fear there may be other things to fret about?"

"Well, there is a risk, of course. Her constitution is very delicate. I have only just brought her round, and now that self-willed sister of hers—for I *know* it was her—but there, let us hope that all will go well."

"I hope so indeed," answered the young fellow fervently, then added something in low tones.

"No, no," said the doctor, laying his hands quietly on the other's shoulder, "I *quite* understand; but there is really no sort of necessity. If it should arise, I will bear what you have said in mind; and,

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of course, it's between ourselves. A doctor is, or should be, as good as a priest for silence. Now, just run home and change; 'brandy and water hot, to be taken immediately,' is my prescription.—A fine young fellow, much too good for the rheumatism," he added to himself, as he watched him stride away, "and almost good enough for Mary. I think India would be beneficial to her rather than otherwise. It would get her away from Martha, for one thing. The pig-faced lady, I believe, made a fortune for her friends, but, with that exception, a pig-headed woman never did anything but harm to anybody. The idea of taking any patient of mine—let alone dear Miss Mary—to Hendon Jut in a north-east gale! *Confound* her!"

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CHAPTER XIII.

THE STORY OF A SIEGE.

MARTHA did not, of course, hear Dr. Gray's "Confound her!" but she had heard enough (before she slammed her window down) to convince her that he would lay at her door any hurt that might befall her sister in consequence of their late expedition. This caused her, however, much more anger than apprehension. Having changed her wet garments, she felt no worse for the adventure herself, and "didn't see why" Mary should be less fortunate; she was even inclined to think that there was an unnecessary fuss made about Mary, for which feeling, however, Dr. Gray was only partly responsible. The solicitude shown by Mr. Waldron on her sister's account (though she quite understood his new relations with her, and accepted them) struck her as

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unnecessary and exaggerated; indeed, it would not have been too much to say that she resented them. She did not exactly say to herself, "It is bad enough that Mr. George Waldron should have preferred Mary to myself, but it is absolutely intolerable that he should begin by entertaining a grudge against me for imperilling her precious health," but something of the kind crossed her mind; it was also certain (though also unacknowledged to herself) that from that moment she began to entertain a grudge against *him*.

It is but fair to say that this in no way affected her tenderness for Mary. If jealousy had for a brief space taken possession of her, she had trodden it out with a firm foot. Her feelings with regard to George Waldron had, indeed, never gone far enough to admit of the growth of that noxious weed; so far as her sister was concerned, she owned to herself that there was nothing to forgive, and she forgave her. So soon as she had completed her toilet she paid a visit to Mary's room.

As she knocked at the door, she fancied she

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heard a rustle as though someone was crumpling up a newspaper; in this, however, she felt she must be mistaken, for she found Mary, as, after the doctor's orders, she expected to find her, in her bed.

"My dear Mary," she cried, with genuine anxiety, "how flushed you look! Do you feel feverish?"

"Not at all," answered the other, laughing; "on the contrary, I am rather cold."

"Then I am afraid you have taken a chill. I have told Jane to bring you up a cup of hot tea. I should have recommended something stronger, but of spirits I think you and I have had enough to-day."

"Yes, indeed; oh, that good man's whisky!" she shivered; "I seem to taste it still."

"He had some more after he had brought me home. He says it always does him good; and I fancy he takes it always."

"We must not say a word against Roger," said

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Mary, "for, after Providence and Mr. Waldron, it is to him we both owe our lives."

"I don't know why you should even put him last of the three," returned Martha drily. "However, I am sure he thought himself well paid for his exertions. By-the-bye, we must ask Mr. Waldron what we owe him."

"Oh, I don't think he would like that, Martha," exclaimed Mary apprehensively. "I am sure it would distress him very much."

"But he didn't pay Roger for rescuing *him!*"

Mary was silent. If Dr. Gray had seen her face he would certainly have said to himself, "*Febrile symptoms.*"

"We are poor, it is true, and he is rich; perhaps he forgot that when he gave that note to Roger; but we cannot allow him, almost a stranger as he is, to remain our creditor."

"He is not a stranger," pleaded Mary; "but it is not that, nor the money which—oh, Martha, I know he would be so hurt, so unspeakably hurt."

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Fortunately, Jane here came up with the tea; and when she withdrew the subject was not renewed. Martha had indeed heard quite enough. Her suspicions, if what were, in fact, convictions could be so called, were fully corroborated. About money matters, especially as regarded debts of any kind, she knew Mary to be exceedingly sensitive, and that, in other circumstances, the obligation George Waldron had placed them under would have been insupportable to her; it was clear, therefore, that something had been said, or implied, which placed that transaction on quite an exceptional footing. Mary's solicitude that the young man should not be "hurt" could have but one explanation.

Mary *had* "taken a chill," and was also slightly feverish; but it was not the latter fact that had brought the colour into her cheeks when her sister had knocked at her door. She was in the act of reading a newspaper, which she had only just had time to smuggle under the bedclothes before Martha entered the room. News did not interest her much in a general way, and what she was perusing was

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not even the yesterday's paper that ordinarily sufficed for Natchett readers; it was one of a very much older date, and which she had, moreover, read before.

It was a sheet of the *Times* containing an account of a certain incident in the late Indian mutiny, which she kept locked up in a drawer; it had always had an attraction for her, but not nearly so great as it had on this occasion. Now that she had drunk her tea, and was alive again, she was perusing it with the keenest interest. The narrative was headed "Another Arrah," and described the gallant defence of a dwelling-house by Europeans against an overpowering force of rebel Sepoys. The story in brief was this: A small colony of Englishmen, with their families, found themselves cut off by the outbreak of the rebellion from all communication with their fellow-countrymen. The thing had been thought possible, rather than expected, for many weeks, during which all sorts of disquieting rumours had reached them respecting the spread of disaffection. But the European in India is indolent, and averse

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to discomfort and discomposure of mind or body. The Sepoys, in the main, it was said, would remain faithful. There was "a scare," no doubt; but things would presently settle down, and it was very unlikely, in the meantime, that the wave of revolt would ever reach so far as Metrapore, their station, where all was quiet and the natives exhibited every sign of friendliness.

One man only—a civil engineer, by name George Waldron—thought differently, and, without attempting to bring his friends over to his views, made his own plans, which his connection with the railway company enabled him to put into execution. Following the example of Mr. Boyle at Arrah, though without knowing it—for the news of its attack and relief had not reached them—he had turned his bungalow into a little fortress. In the centre of it he had caused a well to be dug, and found water—a *sine quâ non,* indeed—and had laid in an abundant store of tinned provisions, with grain and atta. He had collected arms and ammunition, with lead for casting bullets if there should be need for more.

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He had fortified the parapets with sandbags, strengthened with earthworks from the well, and made loopholes in the walls. He had even cut down some of the great trees which shadowed the bungalow and formed its chief attraction, lest they should be made use of by sharpshooters to command it. The house, thus metamorphosed into a fortress, was called by his friends Waldron's Folly. But a time came when they were glad to take advantage of Waldron's forethought.

In a time of profound quiet, when there was nothing to alarm them, except, indeed, a long-continued absence of all news that could be relied upon from without, the catastrophe he had provided against, so far as one man could do it, took place. A rumour arrived that two native regiments stationed at Jagpoot, fifty miles away, had mutinied, and were marching on Metrapore. On the second day, swelled by a great crowd of villagers armed with matchlocks, they had arrived there, and every European, rifle in hand and revolver in belt, had fled from his house and taken refuge with his wife

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and children in Waldron's Folly. There was no time to spare to bring anything else with them, and some had even a narrow escape of their lives; for the "mild Hindoo," even in domestic service, had suddenly become very undomesticated indeed—in fact, a mere wild beast, save for his cunning—and the whole country rose against them as one man.

To seize the gaol, to release the prisoners, and to plunder the public treasury, were, as usual, the first acts of the new-comers; and within an hour afterwards the little garrison was surrounded and amid a hail of fire. It consisted of thirty male Europeans—all civilians, but most of them excellent shots—ten ladies, and fourteen children. The latter were all located in the central hall, tolerably dark and cool, with the well in the centre, from which the women brought water to their gallant defenders. With such precautions as had been taken these were little exposed to danger, save on occasions when it was necessary to visit the roof, so that their scanty numbers were not diminished by

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the fire of the enemy, to which, on the other hand, they replied with the most fatal effect. The advantage of cutting down the trees was now especially apparent, for, though any object that afforded shelter was seized upon by the rebels, they could not approach to within a hundred feet of the bungalow without exposing themselves; the only fear on that score was that it might be carried by a rush. And more than one rush was made. If the worst had come to the worst, and there had been no time to reload, there was a hog's spear for every man (it was afterwards said that Waldron had even provided toothpicks); but fortunately things never came to that pass. There were but thirty men against two thousand, but they were fighting for more than their lives—calm of eye and cool of head, perfectly sure of one another, and thorough masters of their weapons, their multitudinous foes never got within striking distance. But it was sometimes very hot work. What was worst of all was that the dead—the enemy's dead—fought against them: the bodies decomposed in the sun, and the effluvium was in-

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tolerable. The wind, however, was mostly in a favourable quarter, and pestilence was averted. But they had no rest, by night or day, and as time went on the little garrison suffered greatly from exhaustion. They never lost hope; they were certain that their countrymen would not leave them to perish; but it did seem that rescue might come too late. Even that case was to some degree provided for, for they inscribed a diary on the wall by way of epitaph. They had fully made up their minds that neither themselves nor their dear ones should fall into the hands of the Sepoys.

On the third day the rebels brought cannon to bear upon them. As at Arrah, the missiles discharged from them were but four-pound shot, which could not break the walls, but they did mischief; every rifleman that was wounded was a loss indeed to them. The children were patient, and the women were brave, but the want of fresh provisions began to affect their health. Then the little garrison made sorties, and brought in sheep. George Waldron always volunteered for this dangerous service. When

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remonstrated with—for they knew his value to them—he said, "I shall certainly go, since I have neither wife nor child."

It was those parts of the narrative which referred to him which set Mary's heart beating. The rest of it was exciting enough, but when it became personal she felt it personally. She was reading the story of a hero, and he was *her* hero—the same who had that very day, by his wisdom and strength and speed, saved her life, which would henceforward have a new value for her, since it seemed he set such store by it.

As she read on how, after many weeks, those beleaguered people were succoured; how the distant firing was heard that told help was on the way, and then the British cheer that told them it had come, the tears rolled down her cheeks. When the women shook hands with him who had so long been their preserver, she also clasped his hands; when the children clung around him with caresses, she caressed him too.

It was no wonder when Dr. Gray looked in that

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evening and saw her flushed face and feverish eyes that he looked grave. Next to Hetty, Mary was his favourite patient, and he had "built her up," as he called it, with his own hands; brought her through certain dangers incident to her delicate constitution, and put her on the road to health; and now that she was menaced with these anew, from no fault of hers, poor dear! as he was well convinced, it was enough to try any (medical) man's temper.

When George Waldron called upon him, with earnest face, later on, according to his promise, he had but cold comfort for him. "Mischief has been done, my dear sir; there is no denying it. What does not hurt those of coarser fibre" (an allusion, we fear, to Miss Martha Vance) "is of serious consequence to these delicate plants."

"But you do not apprehend danger?" murmured the young fellow piteously; one would never have recognised in that pale pleading face the man who had never feared it.

The good doctor was moved to pity. "No, no,

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no," he said; "there is no need to think of such things yet. I fear the poor girl's being 'thrown back'—that's all, that's all."

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CHAPTER XIV.

AN ANXIOUS LOVER.

POOR MARY *was* "thrown back," as Dr. Gray had prophesied. The exposure to wind and wave, the fatigue of her walk to Hendon Head and back, and perhaps the mental excitement she had gone through, had a very injurious effect upon her. It was weeks before she could be brought down-stairs to the little sitting-room looking out upon the bay, and when she got there she was almost as close a prisoner to the sofa as Hetty Waldron.

Hetty, of course, could not come and see her, which was a great deprivation to them both; but when she arrived at that stage of convalescence (as everybody called it except the doctor), she had many visitors. Even when she had been upstairs, Mrs. Waldron had sat by her bedside very often, and Maggie daily. The latter's companionship had

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been inexpressibly welcome to her; more so even (she felt a little guilty because it was so) than that of Martha herself. Martha was very kind and unremitting in her attention to the invalid, but her subjects of conversation were not so attractive. Mary did not care to hear that Mr. Adderly had driven over to the Cottage to express his opinion that she was a fool for going to the Jut and catching cold. The injurious epithet did not in the least annoy her, but it caused Martha, whose conscience compelled her to apply it to herself, to "fly out" against their uncle in a manner that distressed her exceedingly.

"The man had not one word of sympathy to offer," she said, "nor one grain of help."

"We don't want his help," pleaded Mary softly, looking round her little room, adorned with flowers, furnished with new books, and supplied with everything suitable to the wants of a much more exacting and fastidious invalid than its present tenant.

"Yes, but he did not know that. How could

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he tell that Mrs. Waldron loads you with gifts as her son's almoner? I had a good mind to show him that last tin of turtle soup to shame him; only he has no shame. For all he knows we may be running in debt to the doctor. I wish I was a man and could say things."

In spite of her sex, Martha did indeed contrive to express herself pretty strongly against her uncle, and her wrath was grief to Mary. Of George Waldron Martha seldom spoke, whereas Maggie was full of him.

"You must not mind his sending you things, my dear," she said, in answer to Mary's feeble remonstrances, "because it's his way to be kind and generous; we all have to put up with it; and in your case he will have it that he is partly responsible for your illness; that he ought to have brought the boat more quickly, or not allowed you to walk home. He feels he can never make amends enough for his want of—well, I don't know exactly what—but he somehow feels himself to blame, and to refuse anything that mamma brings you (for that

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it is she who does it, and not he, is a point he is very particular about) would cut him to the heart."

"I can't do that," said Mary, with a feeble smile.

"Well, I hope not, indeed. The great thing is to get you well; after that, any remonstrance or complaint you may have to make will be listened to, no doubt, and judicially dealt with."

The messages, however, Maggie brought to Mary from George might have been delivered by little Susan, the maid; they were kind, of course, very friendly, and even fraternal, but not at all lover-like. He need not have been afraid to make them so, could he have looked into Mary's heart; but he had not the audacity of some men who have not half his courage: he took a very modest view of himself, this young fellow, and was content to bide his time.

Of course, Maggie knew how matters were with him, but he had enjoined silence upon her; he

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wanted to plead his cause with his own lips, when Mary was herself again.

Denied the bliss of talking about George, as she felt sure Mary would have preferred to hear her, Maggie hit upon a most ingenious device. She talked about John Dennet and her own engagement instead, a delightful topic in itself to her, and one which she knew (though her companion took the greatest interest in it on its own account) Mary would in a manner transpose so as to suit her own case; she would merely have to substitute George for John in her mind, and every aspiration, plan, device, and castle-in-the-air would have a personal application for her. This is why, I suspect, young ladies, who are not all so wrapped up in their friends as Mary was, take delight in hearing them talk about their Beloved Objects.

John was coming down to pass a few days at Natchett; there was, alas! no reason why he should not come, so far as any interruption to his professional work was concerned; he had none, or scarcely any. Even Maggie's cheerfulness hung

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fire, as it were, when discoursing upon that subject. It seemed so hard, when there were so many idle people in the world, that those who really wanted work were unable to get it. John had no interest, and had been so foolish as to engage himself to a young person who was not a solicitor's daughter. It seemed, even if they ever married at all, that *she* would be no longer "a young person" when that took place. She was not so reckless, nor indeed was he, as to rush into matrimony without the means of subsistence; as an engaged couple, they lived on hope, but they were not so foolish as to imagine they could live upon it as a wedded pair. Maggie knew what poverty was, even when supplemented by the generosity of a brother; and her married life could not be so supplemented, as she took great pains to impress upon Mary, because of dear John's independent spirit. He really was a fine, honest, chivalrous fellow, and she had a reason for dwelling upon the fact. She wished Mary to understand that whether George married or not, it would make no difference to them as regarded this

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matter; John, she said, would never live on George's hard-earned gains. Even her mother objected to doing so, and, indeed, she could now get on with only a little help, and was exceedingly anxious to see her son settled in life.

This was all quite true, but it was told to Mary to remove any scruples she might entertain about encouraging the attentions of their bread-winner. Mary listened in silence; but she understood it all. Her heart was full of love, yet there was plenty of room in it for gratitude and pity. Every word that was dropped in it fell upon good ground, and was thereafter fated to bring forth fruit a hundredfold. People talk of the froth and foam and emptiness of words, thinking doubtless of that plague of platform speeches from which our nation has suffered so in these later years, but "a word spoken in season, how good it is!" A kind word, gentle and generous and sympathetic, and spoken out of the abundance of the heart, has often altered the whole course of a life.

Sometimes Maggie would talk about John's

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"cases"; he had had but three, of the total value of ten guineas; even from a legal point of view they were not very remarkable, but such was her eloquence and the love which inspired it, that they had an interest for her audience of one far above that which John had excited in his juries. Mary was lost in admiration of this patient pair, and contrasted their position with her own with shame and confusion. What had *she* done to win a man's love—and such a man's!—in a few hours, and to have all her life made easy for her, while love itself was well-nigh denied to their faithful hearts? It was unjust, and almost shameful!

The view of the subject entertained by the family at The Crag was wholly different. That George had been "greatly struck" with Mary at their first meeting had not, as we know, escaped Hetty's sharp eyes; and when he had returned, "like a drowned rat," as she called it, from his expedition to the Jut, it was felt that the matter had become serious. He had dwelt upon his own part in the rescue of the sisters lightly enough; it was

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from Mary's lips that they had heard how Martha and herself had been indebted to him for their lives; but his solicitude about the effects of the adventure upon Mary's health was significant indeed, nor did he make any effort to conceal it. His mother and sisters were solicitous also, for they dearly loved her, but his anxiety was extreme; he seemed, as it were, to have exchanged sexes with them in their respective feelings towards her. The women were sorry and apprehensive about her; the man was distressed and filled with despondency and fear. Dr. Gray seldom returned home from his round of visits without finding somebody waiting for him who was not a patient, eager to hear the last news from the Cottage.

Mrs. Waldron was so accustomed to sickness in her own house, and also to see Mary more or less of an invalid, that she was not seriously alarmed about her. She could look forward to a time when all would be well with her, and, as she was well convinced, with her dear George also. He could not have pleased her better

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than in giving his heart to Mary Vance. Not a selfish thought crossed the minds of either herself or her girls as to the difference that his marriage might make to them in material matters. It was time that he should marry and have someone to take care of him, who had so little care for himself; and in all their little world there was no one that they would have chosen for him, had they had the choice, so gladly as Mary. India, Dr. Gray had assured them (for he had quietly taken for granted that George's secret was no secret from them, and spoken quite unreservedly on the matter), was likely to agree with her; so that even the one obstacle that presented itself—the unfortunate delicacy of her constitution—was not insurmountable. But for the present, while showing their sympathy for George in a thousand ways, they did not speak to him directly upon the subject. They knew, and he knew that they knew, where all his hopes lay, and that was sufficient for them. If Mary had received no harm from her adventure their behaviour would have been very different. Hetty would not have

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spared them; nor would his beloved object herself have been saved from the arrows of her wit. It is probable that there would have been a picture of George in her note-book, flying over the boulders of Hendon Bay without coat or hat, and of the three drenched ones returning from that ill-starred expedition in the cheerful custody of Roger Leeson. But as matters stood "poor dear George" was far too anxious and nervous to be worried, and Hetty kept her arrows in their quiver.

At any other time he would have been delighted to welcome John Dennet, whom he knew to be a most worthy fellow, and tried his best to do so even now; but it was rather a relief to his mind that the young barrister made no great demands upon his time, and was very well satisfied with the companionship of Maggie. George preferred talking to his mother about Mary in a brotherly way—that did not deceive that astute lady for one instant—to conversation on any other subject with anybody. To say that he had not had his love affairs would be merely to add to the mountain of white lies that

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is to be found in those pictures which, under pretence of depicting a hero of real life, portray a snow-man; but his heart had not been touched before.

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CHAPTER XV.

A HAPPY FAMILY.

WHEN John Dennet arrived at Natchett, Mary was decidedly better; what now chiefly troubled the doctor was not so much the girl's illness as the fact of its having arisen from so inadequate a cause: it showed that she had not outlived that delicacy of constitution which he had begun to hope was a thing of the past. "It is fortunate for her," he said to Mrs. Waldron, "that it is summer weather;" but he did not say it gaily.

"You think she ought not to be here in winter?" replied that lady quickly.

"I don't say that; there are so many things to be considered in such a case, besides mere climate. It is there we doctors make such a huge mistake—I mean in not allowing for them."

"George has twelve months' leave," she said.

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The other nodded and smiled gravely. "You may be sure I know all about that. There is to be no obstacle to anything being done; I have *carte blanche.* I never saw a man so—one can't call it 'fallen in love'—so *precipitated* into it."

"Indeed he is. That makes it so shocking to think of danger—the least risk of it."

"Then don't let us think of it, my dear madam: 'Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof;' Mary is better, she will be downstairs on the sofa to-morrow. Think of *that!*"

"Is George to see her?"

"I have promised him five minutes—not a second more. It was like giving water out of a graduated glass to a man dying of thirst; but she must be kept from all excitement for some days."

"She is not easily excited, however," said Mrs. Waldron simply. "Our visits, even when she was at the worst, never seemed to do her harm."

"I dare say not," said the doctor drily; "she might hold a public reception at the Cottage to-morrow, so far as that goes, without much hurt,

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so long as your son, madam, was not one of the guests."

When George Waldron did see Mary, however, it is doubtful whether he was not the more nervous of the two. She had, moreover, the advantage of him possessed by the saint over the worshipper, since from her prostrate condition nothing was expected of her but to be still and mute; whereas he had to say something of tender congratulation. With this, however, she was quite satisfied, and, though it was not very intelligible, understood it perfectly. Martha had very considerately left them to themselves, and by themselves they would have remained for hours had she not come to remind them of the doctor's orders. Mary's voice was still so weak that the young fellow was compelled to draw his chair quite close to the sofa, but it was astonishing with what cheerfulness he put up with that inconvenience. He had brought her a bouquet, of course; so they shared its fragrance between them. We talk of "pity being akin to love," but in George's heart were love and pity too, and Mary's gratitude for

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them could find no expression in words, and needed none. Neither of them, indeed, said anything worth hearing—or at least *our* hearing—but they listened to one another as to the music of the spheres.

"You *are* better, my darling; oh, *tell* me you are better," he entreated softly.

"How could I help it," she whispered, "since *you* are with me? And I am so happy—*oh*, so happy!"

It is shameful to have to note such utterances; yet the conversation of life (thank Heaven!) is not made up of wise sayings or epigrams; and just as the trivial fond records of our dear departed ones—the worthless trinket and the broken toy—have a higher value for us than all the wealth of the Indies, so certain foolish words whispered by loving lips are more precious to their hearers than the maxims of Bacon or the proverbs of Solomon.

Those five minutes, which, thanks to Martha, were fifteen, made George Waldron as happy a man—and that is saying much—as he deserved to be. The mirth at The Crag that evening was for the

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first time unrestrained. It would have astonished Mr. Adderly—though he protested that no human folly ever did astonish him—to see how that pauper family, as (with the exception, of course, of George, for whose prosperity he had a respect) he called the Waldrons, in spite of their miserable condition, enjoyed themselves. John Dennet, a humorous fellow, somewhat younger and much shorter than George, affected to take him under his protection, as though he had been a new boy at school, and to instruct him in all things pertaining to the "engaged" state. He warned him against the insidiousness of "the young person," of which he gave examples from his own experience, which brought upon him the wrath of Maggie.

"Not," she said, "that I consider any man, worthy to be called such, as engaged, until he has given the person he pretends to love an engaged ring, which George has not yet done."

"It is from economical motives," explained Hetty. "He has heard of being 'near' and 'dear,' and is acting up to both his lights and his nature."

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This was hard upon George, who had consulted his sisters upon the matter in question, and been advised that to give Mary a ring would be premature, as taking her acceptance of him for granted.

"I hope you *will* get one for her," continued Hetty sweetly, "because my ring finger is the same size as Mary's, and in case she breaks off the match she must return it, in which case I might just as well have it, you know."

"You are a very wicked and ungrateful girl," said Mrs. Waldron, with such gravity as she could command, "to talk of Mary's 'breaking it off,' even in fun."

"But perhaps George himself may do it, dear mamma: we *know* that he has thrown over the poor Begum; she may not have been young, and she was certainly black, but she has, no doubt, her feelings. It would have been a much more suitable choice. She may have worn her ring through her nose, but she was not dependent upon her lover for supplying it. Morally speaking, she may not have been 'above rubies'—I am not above them myself—but she had

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at least plenty of them. After all, there's nothing like 'a good match,' a lady with lots of money."

"Or a gentleman," observed Maggie drily.

"Just so," said Mr. John Dennet; "that's where you are so exceptionally fortunate, my dear."

But to all this tempest of raillery George answered nothing—only looked as pleased as one at a festival in some sunny clime, who is being pelted with comfits and flowers.

The happiest of domestic circles are not, as they flatter themselves, the "serious" ones, whose temper is not always on a par with their high principles, but those in which light-hearted badinage is freely indulged in, and always taken in good part.

John Dennet, though the world thought otherwise, and pitied Maggie for having given her heart to a penniless man, was, in fact, a very welcome addition to the family at The Crag. He was a man of principle, and thoroughly understood their virtues; his nature was humorous; he was not at all depressed by his ill luck, and appreciated beyond

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measure the fun and brightness of the two girls; while his knowledge of the world, of which the others, including George Waldron himself, were deficient, introduced to them a new element of interest. He had stories from the Courts which, if not very new, were new to them and well chosen; it was only Maggie (who liked it) that he favoured with the account of his own three famous cases. His admiration of George's character was open and sincere, and would itself have been a passport to their good-will. His place among them seemed to have been made for him, and he dropped into it as naturally as a marble into its hole on the solitaire board. In spite of his profession, which of all callings save the Church is most given to artificiality of manners, he was extremely natural, and, though wishing to give pleasure, showed in doing so no trace of effort. He was not always at his ease himself, but had the art of putting others at their ease. On the first occasion when he was permitted to see Mary, she was delighted with him, and delighted Maggie by telling her so.

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In a moment of imprudence, born of pride, Maggie confided this to her sister.

"I am glad you are pleased," said Hetty, with gentle gravity. "Of course no harm *may* come of it, but I confess if I were in your place I shouldn't like it. Mary has taking ways—or, at least, poor George thinks so."

She raised her voice so that George, who was talking to his mother, could not help hearing her.

"What are you pitying *me* about?" he inquired.

"Oh, nothing, dear; I *hope* nothing," sighed Hetty; "only John and Mary have not been behaving quite nicely."

It was a small joke, perhaps, but the way she worked it was delightful. The picture of the trouble which she foresaw Mary's conduct (in the character of an accomplished flirt) would bring upon everybody was worthy of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. She compared Maggie—as one whom "no sense of wrong could rouse to vengeance"—to the needy knife-grinder; as to George, who, but for the enchantments of this Circe, might have married his

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Begum, she could only pity him from the bottom of her heart; about the measure of John's delinquency she could not make up her mind: sometimes she spoke of him as wicked, sometimes as only weak—the victim of a designing woman.

Mrs. Waldron, while shaking with secret mirth, protested that this was shameful of Hetty.

"Shameful of *me!*" exclaimed the saint on the sofa.

And Maggie declared that if such things were said again she would tell Mary.

"You daren't," said Hetty; "you know you daren't" (which was quite true). "No, no, let us at least keep the knowledge of this distressing circumstance to ourselves."

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CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNDESIRABLE ALLY.

MARY had now other visitors besides her friends at The Crag: several ladies, and also two gentlemen. The Rev. Æneas Harden called pretty constantly. He did not, we are sure, regret that she had never been ill enough to need his presence professionally; but he had often envied the doctor his privilege of seeing his patient. Scarcely had George Waldron himself been more solicitous about her than he had, and he had often called at the Cottage to make inquiries about her of her sister. His visits had not been at all welcome to Martha, who was, however, much too wise, and indeed just, to show her displeasure to him. It seemed such a waste of good fortune that the poor vicar (though, indeed, he was not poor, but well off, where lay the sting of it) should entertain a passion that had become more

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hopeless than ever now that George Waldron was his rival, when their respective affections might have been so much more agreeably distributed.

Waldron was not one to boast of his good fortune, and both families were averse to gossip, so that Dr. Gray was, and for a long time so remained, the only depositary of their secret.

The vicar had never been sanguine, but, unaware, of course, that his suit had been anticipated, he showed his passion much more openly to Martha than he had ever done to the object of it. She pitied him a little, for no one could help liking so good a man; but there was a mixture of contempt in her pity. She thought he made rather a fool of himself, which was, howevever, not the case; he was too modest and humble-minded to be even in a fools' paradise. But he was certainly in his own way (which was a very different one from that of his rival) very much in love. It had distressed him to find that there was nothing he could do for the invalid. Martha had thought it wrong, because it would have been an encouragement to groundless

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hope, to permit him even to send her sister flowers. "Mary had too many flowers in her room already," she told him, "to be wholesome."

"Was there nothing that would be acceptable?"

"No, nothing." Her sister was obliged to him for his kind offers, but she had everything she wanted.

The vicar almost regretted that it was not in accordance with the rubric to ask the prayers of the congregation for the sick unless they were dangerously ill. When Mary became well enough to come downstairs, it was only natural that he should have been among the first (he thought, poor fellow! he *was* the first) of her male visitors.

As in George Waldron's case, though for very different reasons, it was a much more embarrassing interview for him than for her. The consciousness of her own engagement almost made her forget that the vicar (though in a very diffident manner) had once paid his attentions to her; and having a most sincere regard for him, and being in a very grateful and tender state of mind, she received him with a

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greater display of warmth than she had ever shown before.

She thanked him for the many visits he had made to inquire after her, in tones that were more than gracious, and which went to a destination for which they were far from being intended—his heart. It was not a time for him to respond to her as he yearned to do, but he had never been so near disclosing to her the secret she had guessed, and, alas! almost forgotten. But, fortunately, another visitor, George Waldron, looked in, and put the temptation out of his reach. The vicar liked and admired the young Indian hero, and had he had the least suspicion of his designs would have felt, no doubt, how small was his own chance against him; but the idea of his being his rival never entered his mind. He saw without surprise that he was warmly welcomed; but George's behaviour towards Mary in his presence was very guarded. He gave most of his attentions to her sister, who, on her part, seemed to receive them with genuine pleasure. Since his love for Mary had been disclosed, Martha, like the sensible woman

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she was, was making the best of it, and playing the part of the sister that was to be.

Never, in short, had the vicar left the Cottage in a happier or more sanguine state of mind than on the present occasion, and happening, before he had gone half a dozen yards, to meet Mr. Adderly, he greeted him with unwonted warmth.

"You will find your niece better, sir—decidedly better," were his first words, as he shook hands with him, for he took it for granted he was on his way to see her. "I am thankful to say that she seems now on the road to health."

"Indeed; that's well!" As a matter of fact, the squire had not had the least intention of calling at the Cottage, nor did he generally waste his time in conversation with the vicar; but there was something in the latter's tone and manner at the moment that attracted his attention. "Now tell me about her." And he led the way into the public garden, and motioned to Mr. Harden to take his seat beside him on one of its many benches.

Nothing loth, the vicar gave him an eloquent

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discourse upon Mary's appearance, state of health, virtues, and accomplishments, which could not, he thought, be uninteresting to such a near relative; and his companion listened to him with unaccustomed patience. What he was thinking to himself, however, was, "Here is the very opportunity I thought of seeking ready to my hand. Here's a second fish worth landing; the other was only nibbling, but this one seems to have swallowed the bait." He thought he saw his way to a good stroke of business. When the vicar told him that he had left George Waldron at the Cottage, he was still more pleased.

"And I dare say they were pleased to see *him*, too," observed the squire. His tone was brusque, even cynical, but that was his way, while his words implied a compliment, which was *not* his way. As a general rule the vicar was compliment proof, but it somehow gave him satisfaction that Mary's uncle should take it for granted that he (Æneas Harden) was welcome at the Cottage.

"Well, of course, sir, everybody is proud and pleased to see George Waldron, as well they may

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be. He is as fine a character as one even reads of. He seems to belong to history rather than to real life."

"Yes, yes," put in the squire, who did not want a disquisition upon valour; "but I was speaking of my nieces."

"Well, they are under an especial obligation to Mr. Waldron, which of course does not render him less an object of their regard."

"And he takes to *them*, does he?"

"How could he help it? Mary——"

"Yes, but I mean the other one. Did it not strike you, quite between ourselves, that Martha and he understood one another?"

The vicar started; he certainly did not understand Mr. Adderly.

"Bless my soul!" cried the squire impatiently, "why, surely *you* ought to know what I mean. Is it possible you can be so dense?"

At which the vicar blushed exceedingly. He did understand now that the question which had

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been put to him was whether he thought Waldron and Miss Martha were in love with one another.

"Well, really, sir," he stammered, "what you hint never occurred to me. They have only known one another for a week or two."

"What does *that* matter?" exclaimed Mr. Adderly contemptuously, as though he himself had been in the habit of falling in love at first sight all his life.

"No, I suppose it does not matter," admitted the vicar humbly, remembering that he had loved Mary from the first, though he had not been so nimble in saying so as it seemed George Waldron was suspected of being in her sister's case. "They certainly seemed very friendly, very. It may be as you say. But the fact is——" here he hesitated, and at last came to a full stop.

"What you mean to say is that your attention was wholly occupied by the other one," observed the squire grimly. "Well, I have no objection to offer to you as a nephew, Mr. Harden, whatever."

It was not a very gracious welcome to the

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speaker's family circle, but it was gratifying to his companion.

"You are very good, I'm sure, Mr. Adderly." The vicar had probably never uttered such a falsehood in his life, but he was quite unaware of his delinquency. He was in such a whirl of happiness that he scarcely knew what he said. Not that he cared the least for the squire's approval, but that the expression of it seemed to give his hopes a certain solidity which had hitherto been wanting to them. To have a backer of any sort was a comfort to him. He would have been sorry indeed to owe his success to Mr. Adderly's intervention, but when we are in difficulties, aid from any quarter is acceptable.

"She is a good girl," observed the squire sententiously; "much more tractable than the other, and not likely to lead you into expenses."

"Oh, sir, I beg you will not talk like that. It is not right, indeed, that we should be speaking of this matter at all. Miss Mary—though always kind, as she is to everybody—has never, you must under-

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stand, given me the least encouragement. I am afraid——"

"Tut, tut, what nonsense, man!" interrupted his companion. "What is there to be afraid of? Who is there for her to take *but* you? Not that I mean it offensively, for, indeed, you're a very good match for her. You have a little money besides your stipend; you're of good family (not that I care one halfpenny about that myself, but women are such fools). The bishop likes you. Why, perhaps you may be a bishop yourself some day."

At this glorious prospect Mr. Harden smiled but faintly, then softly murmured, "I would rather marry your niece, sir, than be Archbishop of Canterbury."

The squire looked at him, with satisfaction struggling with profound contempt. "Very good," he said; "so you shall. I'll just look in at the Cottage at once and tell Mary how pleased I am with the whole arrangement."

"Good heavens! sir, I beg you will do nothing of the kind," exclaimed the vicar, horror-struck. "There *is* no arrangement."

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"I know; but my speaking to Mary will bring it on; I shall treat it, of course, as the common report, and not say a word about *you*. When it is brought home to her like that, she is sure to acquiesce, and it will save you a world of trouble."

A wooing by proxy has certainly its advantages, and the vicar was not blind to them in his own case; but the idea of the squire being his substitute in such a delicate matter was as shocking to him as the manner in which that gentleman had proffered his services.

"No, Mr. Adderly," he said, with some sharpness, "I will speak to your niece myself when an opportunity is afforded me; and I only hope the result may be in accordance with your somewhat sanguine expectations. I could not endure to think that pressure of any kind, though she is much too well principled to give way to it, had been put upon Miss Mary."

"He is a greater fool than I thought he was; he really *is!*" was the squire's reflection, but he saw

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that the vicar's pride was touched, and made haste to conciliate him.

"As for pressure, my dear sir, if you mean by that compulsion, it is out of the question. My niece is of age, and is quite at liberty to choose for herself. However, we'll talk of this another day, Mr. Harden, and in the meantime, since you wish it, it shall go no further. There is, fortunately, no possible rival in your case, so there is no danger in delay; and now just one word about those periwinkles. They are mine, every one of them, as indisputably as every brick in Natchett Hall is mine; but I have been thinking over the matter, and to oblige *you*, Mr. Harden, I am content to waive my claim."

"But, indeed, my dear sir, it has nothing to do with me," protested the vicar, smiling. "I never ate a periwinkle, much less one of *your* periwinkles, in my life."

"They are very good, though," observed the squire, unwilling to hear his property depreciated, even at the moment of parting with it; "with a little bread and butter and a pin, which you need only

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borrow, they make a most cheap and appetizing meal; and now, thanks to you, as you will be quite justified in telling your parishioners, they will be cheaper than ever."

"But they never did pay anything for them," observed Mr. Harden. He was very willing to conciliate the squire, but he had a certain gentle obstinacy, such as one often sees in the other sex; but in this case it only forbade him to tamper with the truth.

"But that was because they stole them, sir!" shrilled the squire. "Is it possible that you can defend theft, which is directly forbidden, I believe, in one of the commandments?" When angry, Mr. Adderly always aired his infidelity, and pretended to be more ignorant of religious matters than he really was, which brought him down to a low level of information indeed. "You must admit that to take oysters out of my bed—I mean, of course, my oyster-bed," interpolated the squire irritably, for the other was staring at him with astonishment, not unmixed with alarm—"is a felonious act. Then why should not my periwinkles be equally sacred?"

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"The question is—and you are begging it, sir—whether they *are* your periwinkles," replied the vicar. He had his forefeet, so to speak, straight before him; his ears were laid back, not in malice, but in determination. It was not in mortal man to move him from his moral position, and the squire had the sense to see it.

"Well, well, we will not argue the matter, Mr. Harden. The periwinkles are yours" (the vicar shook his head), "or, if you prefer it, your parishioners', and there is an end of it. Right is nothing when one wishes to oblige a friend."

This, too, was a statement open to controversy, but the vicar was in no humour to take it up. He shrank from combat, unless, as in the late instance, he was pushed with his back to the wall. It was clear that his companion only meant to be conciliatory, and it was a frame of mind which, even for its rarity, it was his duty to encourage.

To say that he was also conscious that his private interests were deeply concerned in being on good terms with the squire is only to acknowledge that he

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was human. He held out his hand, which the other took, and worked up and down, which, knowing no more of friendship than a savage, he thought to be a sign of amity.

"You must come and see me soon, and report progress, Mr. Harden. I shall be glad to see you any day—after lunch—at Natchett Hall."

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CHAPTER XVII.

THE VICAR FINDS AN ALLY.

THERE are, no doubt, immense advantages in isolation. The Hermit of old had in many respects an unassailable position. He had nothing whatever to think about but himself, and that he indulged in so much speculation about his future was set down to his credit; nobody called on him even in the afternoons; he could eat onions (and did so) without any misgivings as regarded others. If anybody came, it was to admire him. He always believed himself to be *the* Hermit (and when he was so may be justly entitled the Champion Charlatan of the Middle Ages); he was probably as happy and self-contented as egotism can make a man—and it can go a very long way. But then the Hermit really *was* a hermit, and kept himself to himself. Isolation (as in certain scientific

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experiments) must be complete to produce these great results; there must be no half-measures. If one wishes to be entirely independent of the world, one must not mix with it, even occasionally.

Hitherto Mr. Adderly had got on very well in his own way (and had certainly economized) by shutting himself up at Natchett Hall and knowing nobody. But now he had, unfortunately, begun to interest himself in the affairs of other people. It was true he had done so solely with the design of benefiting himself—of saving one hundred pounds a year; but, nevertheless, it was a great mistake. One day the servants' dinner—a bullock's heart—took a much longer time to cook than usual; the bullock had had, perhaps, a hard heart, or the fire (the coals were very cheap coals) was inadequate to its work; and the squire consequently dined at half-past two instead of half-past one. As ill luck would have it, the vicar took advantage of the squire's invitation "to call at the Hall after lunch" on that very day, and arrived before lunch. "A merry heart," we are told, "goes all the way;" but a

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bullock's heart, however merry, goes but a very little way among half a dozen people, and Mr. Harden (with the servants) made the seventh. He was, indeed, far from hungry—for something had occurred to spoil his appetite—but when Mr. Adderly had said, as he could not help saying, "You will have some lunch?" he had replied "Thanks" mechanically. The meal, therefore, had still further to be deferred, to the detriment of the host's temper, and, supplemented, to that of his purse. This was misfortune number one caused by Mr. Adderly's going out of his way to promote the happiness of his fellow-creatures; and he had now to learn that he had not succeeded even in that philanthropic object.

"Well, I hope you have got good news for me —that is, for yourself," added the squire hastily, "in respect to that matter of which we were talking together some weeks ago. I hear that Mary is up and about, and I suppose you have had your opportunity."

"I have had my opportunity," said the vicar, in low, despondent tones; "but I am sorry to say the

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result has been unfavourable. I have nothing to complain of—far from it," he continued, in reply to the squire's ugly look; "I have been treated by your dear niece with the utmost kindness and consideration, but I have failed to gain her affections. I have come here, according to promise, though I had hoped to have other news to give you, and to thank you once more for the good wishes you were kind enough to express for me; but it is all over, and nothing more need be said about it."

"But I shall have a great deal more to say about it," exclaimed Mr. Adderly. "It's all a mistake; you're under some foolish misunderstanding. She cannot have been such a born idiot."

"There is no mistake, sir," replied the vicar gravely. "And I must ask you to restrain yourself, in my presence at least, from any observation that reflects upon Miss Mary Vance's conduct; she has behaved like an angel."

"That's just what I complain of," remarked the squire grimly; "be good enough to tell me, how-

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ever, exactly how she did behave: what did she say when you asked her to marry you?"

"She said, sir, with a tenderness and pity I can never forget, but in words that are too sacred for repetition, that it was impossible that she could do so. She spoke of her regard for me in a way far beyond my deserts, but she made it only too plain that—it is very painful to dwell upon this matter—it could never be as I wished; that—there were insuperable obstacles."

"What obstacles?"

"I did not ask; it was enough to hear, and to feel, as, alas! I do, that they *were* insuperable. I had no right to press the matter, and I did not."

"Well, I can tell you what the objections were," said the squire curtly; "the chief one was the difference in your pecuniary positions. Mary has the pride of the—well, a fallen angel; her sister has not a scrap of it. Martha would ask me for an allowance of five hundred pounds a year to-morrow, if she thought there was the remotest chance of getting it, and when I had given it her would think it

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ought to have been a thousand. That's the sort of girl *she* is. Martha is, so to speak, a rogue, while Mary is—well, quite the opposite. She does not like to go to a rich husband empty-handed."

"Oh, sir, it is impossible that such a consideration—why, good heavens! what is money compared with a possession so priceless as herself?"

"Just so; that's *your* way of looking at it, and a deuced foolish way too, if you will permit me to say so; but her way is different, and infinitely more foolish. You're half a monk, you see, and don't understand the ways of women as I do. Now, you leave *me* to deal with Mary."

"But indeed, sir, I cannot permit that," answered the vicar firmly; "it would be very dishonourable in me, having received her decision and bowed to it, to send another person to importune her."

"Stuff and nonsense! I shall do nothing of the kind. It is simply that the girl is not aware of her own position—takes too modest a view of it. Not

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that I am *promising* either her or you anything, mind you——"

"Indeed, sir," put in the vicar, with a flush, "I don't want your promises."

"Quite right, for you would not get them if you did. But without entering into details, to which your natural delicacy (very properly) renders you averse, it is obvious, as concerns my niece and myself, that there may be eventualities. Martha would be quick enough to see them—I wish you had fancied Martha, by the way, instead of the other; she will have luck, I believe, that she doesn't deserve. Well, Mary is blind to all that, and it shall be my task to enlighten her. It will not be even necessary to mention your name in the matter; but, speaking of matrimony generally, I shall let her know that she ought not to take too modest a view of her position in the world. It is the sense of inequality, I am convinced, that has placed this gulf, as you imagine it to be, between you and her, and a few words from me will bridge it over."

"Indeed, sir, I don't think it will," hesitated the

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vicar, with a sigh. He had very little confidence in the squire's intervention, and ought to have had none at all; but a drowning man clings to a straw, and he did love Mary so dearly.

"Well, at all events, I'll do my best for you, Mr. Harden. Take a glass of—water, I think you prefer, and let us drink to the success of our little plan."

It was rather a lugubrious proceeding; Mr. Adderly was at no time what the citizens of the Great Republic call a "festive cuss," and had never proposed a toast—even in toast and water—in his life before. Mr. Harden's kindly face was still sicklied o'er with the pale cast of rejection; he had a secret conviction that no good could come of the partisanship of his new friend, though, like Mary herself, he had always taken a much too charitable view of him. If he had known him as he really was, he might have prayed for him, but he would never have been his guest: the partaking of that bullock's heart with him would have seemed "a feast of blood," such as takes place in Africa previous to the sacrifice of a virgin. But misfortune

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acquaints us with strange hosts—causes us to trust in strange allies. Whatever might be Mr. Adderly's general character—so ran his guest's reflections—he had certainly shown himself friendly to him in this matter, and could have no other motive for his conduct *but* friendliness, and the conviction that he, the vicar, would make his niece a good husband.

As to the latter, we may conclude that it did not enter much into the squire's calculations; and as to the former, the vicar was mistaken indeed. The motive of Mr. Adderly's new-born love for match-making was wholly a selfish one; he desired "to make two lovers happy," and even two pairs of them—solely for his own sake. He really did believe that the reason for Mary's rejection of the vicar was the one he had given for it; and he honestly proposed to do away with her objection—though not altogether by honest means. He could not bring himself to make her a promise of any material help, even after his death; not that he would have had the slightest scruple in making it, and breaking it, but because he would not eat his own words. He

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felt no difficulty, however, in making a pretence of eating them: he had always told his nieces that they would never have a penny from him beyond what they had already received, and from that position he did not mean to budge; but he intended to speak of that matter to Mary in terms still vague and indefinite indeed, but very different from those he had hitherto used. The quieting of his conscience, which was in a very domesticated condition, and easily appeased, never gave him much concern, but he really flattered himself in this case that the end justified the means. At the worst, he thought he was about to commit a pious fraud; but then Mr. Adderly had very peculiar ideas about piety.

It may be thought strange that he should give himself so much trouble about so small a thing; but nothing in the way of saving—if it were but sixpence—was beneath his attention. It is so with all rich men of small but grasping minds. Since they cannot be millionaires—though it does not require much intelligence even for that—they take an intense pleasure in adding a few pounds to their in-

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comes, or, which is the same thing, in cutting down their expenditure to the last shilling. Yet it is often these very men whose virtues as "charitable donors" (after death) are longest kept in remembrance among their fellow-creatures, so far as congenial brass and stone can do it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PORTRAIT.

It was a day to be marked with a white stone when Mary was well enough to leave the Cottage and be taken in the Natchett fly down to The Crag to see Hetty. They had not met, of course—as Hetty was a prisoner to her couch or her invalid carriage—since it was arranged they were to become sisters-in-law. Their interview was very tender. All Hetty's arrowy wit was laid aside to welcome her, as, indeed, it would have been in any case, for her visitor still bore evident traces of her late indisposition. But Hetty could not alter her nature, and her

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congratulations were a little different from those of other people, though not less sincere.

The two girls conversed together in low tones; cried a little, as girls will do when there is any especial reason for rejoicing; but it was not Hetty's way to remain long in the melting mood.

"My dearest Mary," she said, "you look like a very charming specimen of eggshell china, that has met with an accident, but has been beautifully mended."

"You had better not let George hear you say that," remarked John Dennet; "she is not cracked, you know."

"Cracked china, if you knew anything about it, sir," replied Hetty severely, "is even more valuable than whole china. John comes from London, my dear, and is frivolous; you must not mind him."

"I don't," said Mary; "I am so perfectly happy that I don't seem to mind anything or anybody."

"A nice look-out for George," murmured Hetty plaintively. "However, I suppose it is the right

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frame of mind for India. I hope so, for the Begum's sake."

"And who is the Begum?"

"Oh, if George has not told you, I ought not to have said a word about her," said Hetty, in confusion. "She is an independent princess, who is so foolish as to wish to be otherwise, and make him her Prince Consort. It is a great sacrifice to all of us that he should have thus—well, I won't say thrown himself away, but thrown her over for your sake. But we don't grudge it, my dear. Mamma will tell you all about it."

"Come, you must not keep Mary all to yourself," said George. "I am sure you must have discussed our future sufficiently."

"I was speaking of your past, my dear," returned his sister. "If," here she heaved a sigh of regret, "it be really past."

"I am certain she has been telling Mary about the Begum," cried Maggie, clapping her hands.

"I thought it my duty," said Hetty mournfully.

"My dear Mary," interposed Mrs. Waldron hastily,

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"I need not tell you that the whole story is a fiction from beginning to end."

"I should not have cared, my dear Mrs. Waldron, even if it were true," laughed Mary. "It would have been paying me a great compliment."

"Well, I have seen something of the evils of a long engagement," said Hetty, with a glance at John; "but I could not have imagined that a short one could have so demoralized what I used to think a noble nature. The poor thing may go the length of a Suttee, no doubt, for all you care; at all events, here's her picture, done from George's enamoured description of her. The ring through her nose is said to be worth a lac of rupees." She drew forth a portrait from a hiding-place in her couch. "Perhaps you would like to burn *that,* George."

He took it with a smile, then suddenly his face became rapturous. "Oh, Hetty, this is kind of you, indeed!" he whispered, and stooped down and kissed her.

Hetty's eyes filled with tears, though, true to her-

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self to the last, she murmured, "I have given him the wrong one."

It was not, indeed, a portrait of the Begum, but of Mary herself. It had been her labour of love for the last three weeks.

"I wanted you to have your first wedding-present from my hand, dear George; though it is but a poor return indeed for——" The thought of his many kindnesses to her was too much for the fragile invalid. For the first time in the memory of the little household, Hetty broke down.

It was a touching scene, for love was in every feature of it. There could have been no gift more acceptable to her brother, and it touched his heart from many sides. The drawing, which was in coloured chalks, might have been better executed, but by some happy chance the artist (which far better ones often fail to do) had caught Mary's expression exactly; the one she had worn on the day she had first met her betrothed, when Mrs. Waldron had observed of her that she had never looked so beautiful. Her face had the hue of health, which

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now it lacked, though its present delicacy had as great a charm of its own, and its veiled tenderness and admiration were admirably rendered.

"Now, if I saw this in an exhibition drawn by a stranger," said George tentatively, with his grateful eyes on Hetty, "I should think a hundred guineas a cheap price for it; but being your work, my dear——"

"I do believe he is going to say something rude about amateurs," said Hetty, with a colour in her cheeks that was, however, aroused by no such apprehension.

"No, my dear," put in Mary quietly, "he was going to say that, being yours, it was beyond all price."

"That is exactly what I meant to say," observed George, drawing a long breath.

Mary had done him her first service as a helpmate by saving him from a great mistake. He had been on the brink of offering Hetty a large sum for her handiwork. His mind was as delicate as her own, but generosity to those he loved was so habitual

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with him, that it had ceased to have the qualifications that belong to giving, and became merely self-indulgence. He now saw at once that, but for Mary, he might have offended Hetty's sensitive nature very much, and his gratitude for his escape was paid where it was due.

"Your picture, my dear Hetty," he said, with a glance at Mary, "will only be less dear to me than the original, and more than that I cannot say."

Whether Hetty was aware of the peril in which he had stood was never known. As "nothing ever escaped her," as her family was wont to say, it is probable that *that* had not done so, but she never alluded to it.

When, however, Mary and Maggie found themselves in the latter's room, when the guest was putting on her bonnet for departure, the circumstance was reverted to.

"What an escape, thanks to your presence of mind, poor dear George had!" cried Maggie. "How *could* he?"

"It was only that he is always wishing to do

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those he loves a kindness," said Mary, with glowing cheeks.

"Of course it was, my dear," answered Maggie soothingly; it seemed strange to her that anybody should be defending George against herself, but it gave her pleasure, too; it was quite the right and proper thing, even if he was in the wrong, for Mary to do. "Of course that was the reason; who should know that better than I? If it is more blessed to give than to receive, George should be the happiest man in the world; as, indeed, thanks to you again, he *is*." And with that she kissed her. "And how like your portrait is, Mary—so charmingly like!"

"Except that it is a great deal too flattering."

"I don't think so at all, and I am sure George does not think so. You look less delicate—though, of course, as Hetty would say, there is nothing *in*-delicate in it—than before your illness; but that is just as you will look again."

"Well, Hetty must now draw just such a picture as that of you, Maggie, for John."

"But not as a marriage-present, I fear," sighed

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Maggie, "for these many years. You know that I do not grudge you your happiness, Mary, but it did just give me a little pang at the moment. It made me think of the difference between your case and mine. I sometimes think I shall be old and gray before dear John will be able to call me his wife. He will love me then, I know, as much as he does now, poor fellow; but how truly is it written that hope deferred——"

"Don't, *don't!*" interposed Mary, with her kind eyes full of tears; "it makes me feel so heartless to be happy when you talk like that, Maggie. It seems as if I was *robbing* you; surely *something* might be done. I am sure dear George——"

"Hush, hush!" put in Maggie, in her turn; "you are going to make the same mistake, and from the same cause—a loving generosity—that he did. Indeed, between ourselves, George did make us an offer—a most noble one; but John—and he did quite right—would not hear of it. George has nothing but his salary—a large one, it is true, but not too large for his own needs; and even if it were

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otherwise, as, indeed, it was when his proposition was made (so that *you* have nothing whatever to do with the matter at all, my dear), the thing was impossible: John could not take George's money. We are very happy in each other's love, after all; only now and then the thought of the long waiting, and the seeing no end to it, is a little trying. But, come, we must take you downstairs, and return you to dear George, or he will never let me have you, even for five minutes, again."

It was the last time, as, indeed, it was the first, that Maggie had bemoaned herself—as she called it—about her long engagement to Mary, but the latter never forgot it. Her tender heart was henceforth full of schemes—all vain and baseless—for helping John and Maggie, and its happiness was not a little dashed by her inability to do so.

When the girls went downstairs, George was not in the impatient mood in which Maggie had painted him. He was still enraptured with what Hetty called his "new toy," and his mother "that lovely

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portrait." It really did in after-years, in some degree, console him for her absence.

"Since it seems to have taken George's fancy so much, Mary," said Hetty, "suppose I do another portrait of you for Uncle Adderly."

"Certainly *not!*" exclaimed George.

"Pooh! pooh! There is nothing to prevent a great artist from painting duplicates. Haydon did scores of portraits of Napoleon at Elba with his arms folded—doubtless to give him a local colouring."

"Is it possible that she has made a pun?" inquired John, in horrified accents. "All is over between us, Maggie. I am sorry for it, but I will not be connected, however remotely—and the relationship seems remote, Heaven knows!" he put in grimly—"with a young person who can so demean herself."

"And who also," observed George, "wants to give a picture of Mary to Mr. Adderly."

"And why not?" inquired Hetty innocently. "He is her only relative but one, and dotes upon her even more than on the other. It is probable

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that he would not give much for Martha's picture, but for Mary's—his own Mary before Mr. George Waldron was ever heard of—he would probably give a long price."

"Forty shillings," ejaculated John contemptuously.

"How little he knows your uncle, Mary!" murmured Hetty pathetically. "John's mind runs upon damages—probably in breach of promise cases, for he wants to get off his bargain, as you saw just now—that bring costs. If I do not take a mistaken view of your dear uncle, he would shrink with scorn from offering forty shillings for a picture of his favourite niece."

"George, you must stop her," exclaimed Maggie, laughing in spite of herself. "It is your place now to see that Mary is not teased."

"What have I said—what have I done?" inquired Hetty plaintively. "I am defending Mary's uncle, and George's uncle——"

Here George roared.

"From the suggestion that he would offer forty

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shillings for Mary's picture. If Mary says, upon her honour, that she thinks he would offer forty pence, I retract and apologize."

It was not possible to argue with Hetty, far less to repress her. Even Mary herself could not help laughing at her pretence of enthusiasm, expressed with such supernatural gravity, for Mr. Adderly. As for the rest of them, they were convulsed with merriment. If they had known what was going on at the Cottage at that moment, and in connection with the gentleman in question, it is probable, to use the children's phrase, that they would have "laughed on the other side of their mouths."

CHAPTER XIX.

SPEAKING HER MIND.

MARTHA VANCE had never been a happy girl. Unlike her friend Hetty, hers was not the merry heart that goes all the way, nor the half of it. Her nature had dissatisfaction in it, to begin with, and as she grew up the sense of wrong was added to

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her sense of lack. She brooded over matters even after her intelligence had shown her the necessity of submitting to them. She really loved her sister, and could not be said to grudge her the great good fortune that had happened to her, even though she had hoped it had fallen to her own lot. She felt that it was an excellent thing that Mary was so well provided for, and there was nothing in her behaviour to George Waldron which suggested anything but the kindliest feelings. She knew him to be a generous, brave, and tender-hearted man, but in her heart of hearts she did not like him. No one suspected this, and the necessity for concealing her real feelings towards him the more embittered them. Such things happen everywhere in households. To respect and not to like is as common (almost) as to love without respecting. If taxed with such a feeling, Martha would have denied it with indignation, for she scarcely acknowledged it even to herself; but it existed, nevertheless. Sorry as she would be to lose her sister, the fact that her absence would entail that of George Waldron also

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was a secret source of consolation to her. She would have been shocked indeed if even conscience had whispered to her, "You hate the sight of that man;" but life never seemed more intolerable to her than when he was present. She felt a sense of relief that afternoon, when Mary for the first time drove down to The Crag, because it did away with the necessity of receiving him at the Cottage. He would see Mary home, no doubt, but there would be no excuse for his remaining; she need not make conversation for him, or pretend not to hear when he poured his soft nothings into her sister's ear.

It was, therefore, with irritation that, within an hour of Mary's departure, Martha heard the wheels of the fly again; why could not the enamoured pair have billed and cooed at The Crag instead of returning to the Cottage to do it? George's income was large enough to admit of his keeping the fly at the door, even at half a crown per hour. She was little less disgusted, when Susan came up to her room, with "Please, miss, Mr. Adderly has called, and wishes particular to see you," to find that the squire

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had arrived, and not, as Mrs. Waldron called them, "the young people."

She was even less in the humour for making herself agreeable to her uncle than usual; but one thing which she had always shrunk from with respect to him since the day he had brought her up in his carriage from the Spa she was now no longer apprehensive about. He had no doubt somehow or other heard of her sister's engagement—his wanting to see her so "particular" convinced her of it—so that she would at least be spared any reference to the plans the old fool had had in his head as to her own union with George Waldron. Any allusion to *that* matter would, indeed, just now, have been intolerable to her. She cast one look in her glass—as every woman would do even if she were about to receive as a visitor the Father of Evil—and ran downstairs to meet her uncle.

"Well, how are you?" said Mr. Adderly, holding out his stiff fingers as usual, "and what is of more consequence, how is Mary?"

It was not a courteous greeting, and though

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Martha did not expect courtesy, the squire's rudeness grated on her more than usual; she knew, of course, that he disliked her sister less than herself, but his demonstration of it was, in her present state of mind, especially offensive to her. He had come, of course, to congratulate Mary on her engagement, for since she had done so well for herself, she had doubtless already become of some consequence in her uncle's eyes.

"Mary is much better," answered Martha; "she is gone out for a drive for the first time to-day."

"A drive! Well, I suppose, then, that somebody has been found to pay for the fly; that is just what I came about."

"About paying for the fly?" inquired Martha drily.

"What a fool you are!" exclaimed the squire irascibly, "as if I cared one halfpenny who pays for it, so long as it isn't me."

"I don't think Mary will need to apply to you to defray this extravagance," she answered quietly.

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"There is someone now to take that burthen upon his own shoulders."

"I'm deuced glad of it!" said the squire. "So she has turned out a more sensible girl than I took her for, after all, has she? Well, I think her young man might have called and told me as much. I am come here a day after the fair, it seems."

"Perhaps he thought you were not much interested in the matter."

"That's impossible, miss, because he knows I am."

"I don't understand you."

"You don't 'understand' me!" Here he endeavoured to imitate Martha's icy voice and distant manner, with no great success, it must be owned; but he certainly did succeed in making himself most insolent and offensive.

Martha's temper was getting shorter and shorter, like a slowly-burning fuse.

"Well, the fact is—for there is now no longer any need for secrecy in the matter," he continued—"he called at my house some days ago with the

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object of gaining my good offices in the matter, for at that time there seemed to be some hitch about it."

Martha could scarcely believe her ears. There seemed no necessity for her uncle to add lying to his various accomplishments, and yet that George should have called at the Hall, after the opinions she had heard him express of the squire, seemed incredible.

That he had done so to bespeak his good word was, of course, ridiculous; but was it possible that George Waldron, for all his supposed independence of character, had an eye to the main chance after all, and had made an effort to conciliate the rich uncle of his destined bride? Martha would not have been sorry, perhaps, to find out an imperfection or two in this paragon, but, in the present case, at least, she felt he was blameless. No, he never *could* have done such a thing.

"At the risk of your again making merry with my stupidity," she said coldly, "I must once more

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say that I do not understand this matter. There must be some mistake somewhere. If Mr. George Waldron ever called at the Hall, he has certainly never said one word to us about it."

"I am not talking about George Waldron. If you could keep yourself and your own affairs out of your mind for half a minute, miss, it would be a blessing to your friends. Not that I have any objection to see the young man, if he means business; but just now I am giving myself some trouble about your sister and Mr. Harden. I gather, of course, that she has now definitely accepted him."

"My sister Mary, sir, is engaged to Mr. George Waldron."

"What? Not to the vicar, but to the other?" exclaimed the squire, in amazement. "Well, upon my life, that's quick work! One hears of being off with the old love before we are on with the new, and I do hope she's hooked him. At all events, there's one of you off my hands. Since Waldron has thrown you over, it seems, for your pretty sister, why shouldn't *you* take the vicar?"

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"You are a mean, insolent, cowardly hound!" observed Martha calmly.

"I am a *what?*" said the squire, starting from his chair.

"A mean—insolent—cowardly *hound!*" repeated Martha, with great distinctness. Her passion was beyond his, as a white heat excels a red one. "You will die in a year or two at furthest, and nobody will regret you; and if there is such a thing as a place of future punishment, even with but one person in it, you will be that one person."

Of course it was but a brief pleasure; but Martha used afterwards to say that this telling her uncle what she thought of him was the happiest moment in her life. It certainly afforded her the most intense enjoyment.

If, overcome with the rage that consumed him, he had fallen down in a fit and expired on the spot, her satisfaction would have been complete. But Mr. Adderly's habit of body was spare, and he survived the experience. What his coachman thought of him by the time they got home, and what his

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butler thought of him as he sat over his meat tea, cannot be here set down. The servants' hall had never before listened to such *ana* about "master" as were retailed that night. The post had gone out; but the squire could not rest before he had sat down and written a certain letter, the composition of which afforded him some slight relief.

Some people as they lie sleepless in their beds are haunted by a rhyme or a line of blank verse; the squire did not read poetry, so this had never happened to him; but he was haunted all that night by a line of prose.

"You are a mean, insolent, cowardly hound!" recurred to him with the tenacity of the famous refrain of Mr. Mark Twain's, "A three-trip slip for a two-cent fare."

He had only very seldom had the advantage of hearing what people really thought of him, and Martha's outspeaking made a great impression upon him—so great, indeed, that even the reflection that he would henceforth save fifty pounds a year—for, of course, she would never again see one penny of

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her uncle's money—by her insolent impertinence, did not console him for the insult. There was also another reflection that positively made him shiver with rage and fear. Contrary to the general belief, the squire had hitherto omitted to make his will, though Death, as he had always protested, was the end of all things—so vehemently that one might perhaps have said of him, "Methinks he doth protest too much." Moreover, it had been commented upon that that munificent gift of a public library comprehended quite an unusual number of works upon longevity. He had, in fact, rather shrunk from making any post-mortem arrangements. But now that it was just possible, if he should die that night, for instance, that half his hoarded wealth should go to the very woman who had so insulted him, whom he had always disliked, but whom he now hated with "the hate of hates," he cursed his foolish procrastination.

Not another twelve hours would he pass tormented by such a hideous thought. Instead of sending his letter to his lawyer by the morrow's

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post, he would despatch a messenger in the morning to bring him to the Hall at once. Having decided upon that important step, the squire's mind quieted down a bit, and he fell asleep at last when the birds were just beginning their matin song.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SMALL END OF THE WEDGE.

As was only reasonably to be expected, George Waldron saw Mary home that afternoon, and even when they reached the Cottage went in with her, for a few words, as he said, with "dear Martha." If he had really built his hopes on that, he was doomed to disappointment, for Martha was upstairs "with a sick headache." Mary had never known her sister to have such a thing in her life; and she did not for a moment believe that she was suffering from anything of the kind. Every woman understands that the calamity in question is merely used by her sex as a figure of speech. When a creditor, or a neglected suitor, or another woman whom they

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detest, makes a call on them, they have sick headaches, and can see nobody. In Martha's case, however, Mary knew that there must be something much more serious to keep her above stairs. She found that Mr. Adderly had called in her absence, and at once arrived at the conclusion that that gentleman had "upset" her sister.

"It is most unfortunate, my dear George," she said pathetically; "but dear Martha is always more or less put out by Uncle Adderly's visits."

"Upon my life I can't blame her!" responded George laughingly. "I should be put out myself if I were in her place, and should feel very much inclined to put *him* out. I am bound to speak of your relatives with respect, my dear; but really your Uncle Adderly——"

There was a sudden pause, followed by what grammarians call a "labial" sound.

"If you stop me like *that*, my darling, I shall continue to abuse him. It is a positive premium upon malediction."

Indeed, George felt rather grateful than other-

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wise to Mr. Adderly for having been so good as to call.

Mary had some little difficulty in getting rid of her swain; but no sooner was it accomplished than Martha presented herself in the parlour. She might not have had a sick headache; but, if so, it was evident that something else—and that no light thing—was the matter with her. Her drawn and haggard face was painful to look upon; but what was worse was the sullen fire in her eyes.

"Mary," she exclaimed, "I have a favour to ask of you."

"A favour! You may be sure, my dear, that if it is within my power——"

"It *is* within it," answered Martha, in a voice at once harsh and hoarse. "Never mention Mr. Adderly's name again within my hearing."

"Oh, Martha, what has he done?"

"He has done nothing; it is what he has *said* that has separated him and me for ever. I will never forgive him; no, not even when he is dead and——"

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"Hush, for Heaven's sake," implored the trembling girl. "Think, think of what you are saying!"

"I am thinking of it, because I am thinking of *him*. There must be a hereafter, if it is only to punish that base wretch. I am sorry to shock you, Mary. It is selfish of me to thus distress you when your health is so delicate, but if I do not speak out I shall die. You ask me what he said, but I cannot tell you; to hear it would be worse for you than anything. He has heaped upon me unspeakable insult. He is a mean, insolent, cowardly hound, and I told him so in so many words."

"You told him so!" repeated Mary mechanically.

Such news would have been terrible enough in any case; but to hear it after the experiences of that afternoon—the contrast of it with the happy home life of which she had so lately been a witness, and of which she had been permitted to partake—was too much for her in her enfeebled condition, and she fell back on the sofa in a dead faint.

When she came to herself she knew, from the cushion having been removed from beneath her

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head and the wet coolness on her face, that means had been taken for her restoration; but Martha was sitting at some distance from her with her eyes fixed on the empty firegrate, and an expression on her face which made Mary shudder, though she knew it had nothing to do with her or hers, for it was the embodiment of a relentless hate.

"Do not let anything Uncle Adderly has said distress you, dear Martha," she murmured softly. "And even if you said what you told me to *him,* he can only take away his hundred a year from us. I am quite certain that need not trouble us now."

"It does *not* trouble me," was the fierce rejoinder. "There was a time when I would have taken from his unwilling hand anything I could get; but now, should he offer me a thousand-pound note to-morrow, I would tear it up, and feel a greater pleasure, as I threw the fragments in his face, in knowing that he had lost it, than if he had given me half his fortune. Trouble me! I would rather beg in the streets of Natchett than be indebted

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to him for another shilling. If I could kill him, slowly——"

"Oh, Martha, Martha, may Heaven forgive you for such revengeful thoughts!"

"I cannot prevent my thoughts, and I would not if I could," was the cold rejoinder. "My only regret is that they cannot be deeds. The mean, insolent, cowardly hound!"

These words kept ringing in Martha's ears continually, just as they did in those of her uncle, but with a very different effect: there was a music in them that soothed her; it was with intense satisfaction she reflected that she had at last told Uncle Adderly what she thought of him—an aspiration she had entertained for years. But unhappily she felt by no means even with him on that account; she did not know how furious her words had made him, or how they stuck in his memory. She thought that the cutting off her allowance would more than make up to him for the insult she had put upon him, a reflection that increased her hate and rage.

"You spoke of our hundred a year being taken

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away just now, Mary," she said presently; but I have no reason to suppose that he will punish you for my offence, and I should be very sorry if such were to be the case."

"Do you suppose I am going to take Uncle Adderly's money *now*, Martha," inquired Mary gravely, "after he has said to you things so shameful that you cannot repeat them to me? Even if I wished to do so base a thing, I am sure dear George would never permit it."

"Still, we must remember that your refusal would be the very thing to give the old miser pleasure, and we don't want to give him pleasure, but pain."

"I cannot say I want to give him pain, Martha. It is wicked to want to do that to anybody."

"Then I am very wicked just now," was the dry rejoinder; "there is nothing too bad for him in my opinion—*nothing!* Perhaps you are right about his money, after all; when he sends you yours, as usual, we will return it, and I will tell him again he is—well, what I think of him."

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Mary saw that it was useless to argue with her sister; she now only wished that she would carry out her first idea of never mentioning her uncle's name; but the subject had a terrible fascination for Martha. Mary was glad to excuse herself from listening to her denunciations of the squire on the score of fatigue, and to take refuge from them in her bed.

In the morning things were but little better; she had had a bad night, but it was clear that her sister had passed a worse one. Martha looked weary and worn and black under the eyes, but her tongue was as active as ever, and spoke out of the abundance of an angry heart. The fact was that the more she thought of her behaviour to Mr. Adderly, the more she felt that he had got the better of her. Though her views were the same as to the rejection of anything from his hand with scorn, the common-sense which underlaid her nature pictured the inconveniences which the withdrawal of his allowance would necessarily entail upon her. She hardly possessed enough means of her own to

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purchase the barest necessaries of life, and though she had taken no notice of Mary's hint with respect to George Waldron's assistance, she was resolute to decline it, should it be offered. She would almost as soon have taken alms from the squire himself.

Martha Vance had a good deal of the grasping character of her uncle in her nature, and but little pride; but, while very willing that her sister should benefit by George's ample purse, she felt it impossible to take one coin from it for herself. This reluctance did not at all arise from her knowledge of the poverty of his belongings, or what they might think of his money going "out of the family," but simply from her own feelings towards him. Unreasonable as it was, now that they had quarrelled with their only relative, and George was their sole prop and stay, she somehow disliked him more than ever.

"You must not tell George what has happened," she said to her sister. "I mean as regards the gulf that now exists between ourselves and that man at the Hall. Everybody will know it soon enough;

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but the actual cause of the rupture, be so good as to remember, is my secret."

"But George is sure to ask me about it," pleaded Mary. "He knows that Uncle Adderly called here yesterday, and he will naturally suspect——"

"You mean," the other interrupted sharply, "you told him that *you* suspected that that was the cause of my indisposition. You may say what you like to Mr. George Waldron respecting your own affairs, but I wish you would not speak to him about mine, Mary."

"Oh, Martha, how can you talk like that of him, when he has our welfare so much at heart!"

"He has *your* welfare, of course, at heart, and his own; you and he will soon be one; you and I, it is true, have hitherto been one, but George and myself are not one. Be so good as to remember that."

Considering the look and tone which accompanied that statement, it was not likely Mary should forget it. Her dreams about Martha's sisterly feel-

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ings towards George, and the comfort he would be to her in this new calamity, were rudely dispelled as she looked at her, while that word "hitherto," which seemed to treat their former relations as a thing of the past, wounded her still more deeply.

"Is it possible," she exclaimed, "that my engagement with George Waldron seems to separate you from me, Martha, in any way? If I thought so, half my happiness in it would be destroyed."

"There would still be enough left, considering how happiness is distributed, to satisfy any ordinary mortal," answered Martha, with an unmirthful smile. "As to your engagement, that will not last for ever, and when you are married we shall certainly be separated—by the ocean. Of course you may say that space cannot divide us. That is all very well in poetry and novels, but, as a matter of fact, the old proverb, 'Out of sight out of mind,' has a great deal of truth about it."

"That is just what George says, though I am sure he is a living instance to the contrary; and I will tell you now what he meant to tell you himself, that

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what he proposes to do is to offer you a home with us in India, so that you and I may live together just as we do now."

She spoke with earnestness and joy; the proposal was "so like dear George," and had, in fact, removed from her the only pang she felt in the prospect of their marriage. She entertained no doubt that Martha would hail it with unmitigated pleasure.

"No, dear," was the unexpected reply, given with great coldness; "it is very kind of George, of course, to make me such an offer, but it is quite out of the question that I should accept it. Be so good as to tell him so, and thereby save me from the unpleasantness of having to do so myself."

END OF VOL. I.

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VOL. 2682.

THE WORD AND THE WILL BY JAMES PAYN.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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THE WORD AND THE WILL

A NOVEL

BY

JAMES PAYN,

AUTHOR OF "BY PROXY," "UNDER ONE ROOF," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1890.

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THE WORD AND THE WILL.

CHAPTER I.

"SOMETHING HAPPENS" TO THE SQUIRE.

It is often said that if a man should know the exact date of his death, his views and acts would suffer change so that, as it grew near, at all events, he would become another man. This, however, is doubtful, for there is little difference between the position of such an individual and that of any aged person, and yet very old men are the last of all to alter their ways. They all know that in a very few years at the very most, and probably in a few months, they must be lying on their deathbeds, that they have almost come to the end of their days, and yet they live the last of them pretty much as

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they have lived the rest. The explanation of the matter, in many cases, is, of course, that though they know their tether in this world is getting so short, they are averse to think about it; and this had hitherto been the case with Mr. Adderly. He was an old man, but many men were much older, and there was at all events no immediate necessity for occupying his mind with a disagreeable subject.

But now this matter forced itself upon the attention of the squire with great importunity. His first waking thought in the morning was to settle his affairs in this world while life was in him; not till he had done that could he henceforth have any enjoyment of his possessions; the idea of the possibility of them falling into his niece Martha's hands, however unlikely such an event might seem, was insupportable. The notion of leaving half one's fortune to a person who has described one to one's face as a "mean, insolent, cowardly hound" would probably be disagreeable to most people; but to the squire it was wormwood. The girl had always hated and de-

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spised him, he knew, even when she had striven to appear subservient to him; but he had never imagined that she would have ventured to tell him so. One or two people in the world—such as the M.F.H., for instance—had wagged their tongues against him; but they were his equals, and socially even his superiors; but the revolt of his slave was intolerable.

He had despatched a groom on horseback to Halsworth to fetch Mr. Rolfe, the lawyer, and was awaiting him with fretful impatience. If any gentleman of the legal profession had lived nearer he would have sent for *him;* one has often heard it said that one of the disadvantages of living in the country is that you may be too far away from a doctor; one has never heard this said of a lawyer, but Mr. Adderly now experienced it. He had little appetite for breakfast, and after that meal he began walking up and down the garden on the side of the Hall that looked towards Halsworth.

It was mid-day when the groom returned alone, for Mr. Rolfe was not at home; he had left the

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squire's letter at the lawyer's house, to be delivered as soon as he returned, and the servant had assured him the matter should be immediately attended to; but such news had little comfort for Mr. Adderly. He seldom indulged in violent language; he was a cur that snapped and bit, but rarely barked; but on the present occasion he swore at large. If he had fined himself, which, as a magistrate, he ought to have done, for every naughty word he spoke, it would have cost him a pretty penny; every now and then these execrations were diversified by the repetition of Martha's description of him as a "mean, insolent, cowardly hound," after which, like one invigorated by a cordial, he would start off again with a new set of expletives.

At luncheon he ate nothing. "Master's mouth," as the butler, unconscious of quotation, described it, "was full of curses": he scattered these flowers of speech in luxurious profusion upon everything and everybody; but the choicest of them—the finest bouquet—was reserved for that respectable solicitor, Mr. Rolfe. Not another stroke of business should

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he do for him when he should have done this one. What right had one's lawyer to be away from home on this very day out of three hundred and sixty-five when one wanted him? Suddenly it struck him that that reflection was illogical, and he wondered at his having entertained a thought so contrary to common-sense. Was it possible that he was going out of his mind with rage and fear? And what, at all events, was there to be afraid about? It surely behoved him to put some restraint upon his feelings, lest, when the lawyer did come, he should find himself inadequate to the important task to help him in which the other had been summoned. There was a great deal to be said and done between them, and it would all have to be settled that day, for another night he would not pass intestate.

The afternoon, however, lengthened into evening, and still Mr. Rolfe did not appear. Supper seemed out of the question, and yet the squire compelled himself to partake of it, lest strength should fail him for the work he had to do. As to the details of his will, however, about which, whenever he

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thought of the subject, he had formerly been very solicitous, they had become comparatively indifferent to him. Whether the university or anything else should be founded, and called after his name, was a matter of small importance compared with the putting his fortune out of the reach of his natural heirs. He was resolved to make an interim will himself, and get it signed before he went to bed, if the lawyer should not arrive, but still he waited for the lawyer. He was not at all in a fit state of mind for drawing up such a document, however simple, and he knew the dangers of a will executed by an amateur. His behaviour for the last twelve hours, he confessed to himself, had been very queer. The witnesses to it—who would be also the witnesses to the deed—were hostile to him, and it was quite possible, should anything happen to him in the interval, that Martha might dispute his will upon the ground that he was out of his mind when he made it. He almost doubted whether he was *not* out of his mind.

It was curious how that notion of "something

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happening to him" within the next few hours haunted his imagination. If his temperament had been a nervous one, the presentiment might almost have brought about its own fulfilment. And yet, in the ordinary courses of nature, what *could* there be to fear? Still he *did* fear. Just as when a great stroke of good fortune is about to fall upon one who has experienced only ill-fortune, he doubts whether he will live to see it, so did the squire almost doubt lest he should live to make his property secure from the clutches of that harpy, who had called him "a mean, insolent, cowardly hound."

The night came, and still found him walking to and fro in the garden. A delicious coolness was in the summer air, freighted with the fragrance of a thousand flowers; but it gave him no pleasure. The sounds of evening, the far-off murmur of the wood-pigeon, the drowsy tinkle of the sheep-bell, fell upon his ear in vain. It was only listening for the beat of a horse's hoofs, or the ring of wheels upon the Halsworth road. Presently, as it grew darker, he saw something on the road; it was a female

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figure advancing very slowly, and now and then stopping either for breath or to look around her, as a stranger might do who is doubtful of his bearings. Under ordinary circumstances this would not have attracted Mr. Adderly's attention: he was not interested in tramps; but this woman, whoever she was, had probably come from Halsworth, and that aroused in him a certain curiosity; it was just within the bounds of possibility that she might be the bearer of some message from Mr. Rolfe.

As she drew nearer, he perceived, however, that she *was* a tramp, a mere beggar woman, and could have no concern with him. Satisfied as to that, he would have taken no further notice of her, but for a strange proceeding on her part. That part of the garden of Natchett Hall that fronted the Halsworth road was separated from it by a sunk fence, or ha-ha, in the centre of which was a little bridge, guarded by a gate which was never locked. It had never entered into the squire's mind that any passer-by should be so lost to all sense of propriety as to trespass on his private pleasure-ground; this

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woman, however, crossed the bridge and tried the gate, and, finding it open, walked straight into the garden without the smallest hesitation, and this, too, though she could now plainly perceive its proprietor glowering at her with unspeakable rage.

Mr. Adderly was not in a humour to deal lightly with trespassers, but her impudence, for the moment, confounded him. She came up to him very swiftly —by no means with the same halting step she had used upon the road—and stood close beside him. She was quite unknown to him: a tramp in the last stage of poverty; dust-covered, weary and worn in feature, and gray-headed, but with wild, fierce eyes.

"So you are not dead, Joseph Adderly," she said, in cold, resolute tones.

"You drunken beast!" exclaimed the squire passionately, "how dare you come into my garden?"

"I say," continued the woman, paying no attention to this inquiry, "I am sorry for your own sake —and mine—to find you still alive. Nothing but death could have made me think of you otherwise than as the meanest cur on earth. Is it possible

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that you could live yonder," she pointed to the Hall, which in that doubtful light looked imposing enough, "and roll in wealth, and yet refuse a ten-pound note to the woman whose life you ruined?"

"Oh, you are Nancy," he said, with a contemptuous sneer, "are you? You have changed decidedly for the worse."

"Yes, I am what once was Nancy; and, as you say, I have changed—thanks to you—for the worse, you miserable hound!"

She was angry, indeed—much more angry than he was; but yet there was something of pity in her tone, which in the squire's present state of mind stung him to madness.

Even Martha had not gone the length of pitying him. The coincidence of the use of the word "hound" caused him to associate the two women whom he hated most in all the world together.

"Hound, you said?" he answered. "I will give you just two minutes"—here he pulled out his watch—"to clear out of this. If you are not in the road by that time I'll whistle for the dogs. They are

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always unchained at nightfall, and such as you are just the meat they relish. If they once get hold of you, I could not stop them from their meal, even if I would."

With one hand he still held his watch, and with the other he clasped the silver whistle he wore about his neck; his face was, therefore, unprotected, but it did not seem to occur to him that she might strike it, nor did she do so.

"So that is your last word to me, Joseph Adderly, is it?" she asked in low, firm tones. "You have nothing else to say to me—to *me,* whom you took from my mother's home to be your plaything, and, having tired of me, left to starve—but 'I will set my dogs on you'?"

For answer he raised his whistle to his lips, but dropped it ere it reached them, with such a scream of agony as made the woman cast away the phial, the contents of which she had flung in his face, and put her fingers in her ears to shut out the sound. Again and again it thrilled through the startled air, as he threw himself on the ground and writhed in

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torment, and, as if in reply to it, there came a sound of galloping hoofs from the road without. The woman had but just time to open the gate and pass into the ha-ha, along which, with bent head, she fled unseen, before Mr. Rolfe rode up, threw himself from the saddle, and, guided by the screams, ran to the prostrate squire.

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CHAPTER II.

THE SUMMONS.

NATCHETT was a quiet village, wherein folks kept early hours. At the time when the daughters of fashion are dressing for "at homes" (which means abroad) the ladies of that secluded locality were wont to retire to rest. As for its boating population, they were in bed and asleep when the gay world of London was sitting down to dinner. Unless there was an evening party, and the Natchett fly in demand, there was not a sound to be heard in the streets after nine o'clock. Imagine, therefore, the astonishment of those who were awake when a carriage and pair dashed down it one night at a quarter to ten, and stopped at the Cottage door. In more civilized regions it would of course have been set down to fire, but there was not a fire-engine within ten miles of the place. The sisters, for a wonder,

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had not retired to their beds; the day, though uneventful, had been full of excitement for both of them, and they were in no mood for sleep.

In obedience to Martha's wishes, Mary had not revealed the width of the gulf that yawned between them and their uncle. It was impossible to conceal from George the fact that there had been an unpleasantness, but she made as little of it as she could. In some respects this was unfortunate, for, to please Mary, as he imagined, George made little of it, too, to Martha. He cared nothing about the matter himself, but he preached peace because he thought that message would be acceptable. Martha persuaded herself that he did so in order to escape responsibility, to shirk the offer of assisting her in case Mr. Adderly cut off her allowance, which he had made to Mary. Nothing that George Waldron did could be right in her eyes. Mary herself began dimly to perceive this, and it gave her great distress of mind; but she tried to believe that that terrible interview with her uncle had, for the present, utterly demoralised her sister, and prevented her

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taking a just view of anything in connection with him.

They had talked over the matter again and again, for in spite of Martha's averment that she never wished to hear his name mentioned, it had a morbid fascination for her, and the more they discussed it the bitterer she grew. Even the noise of the carriage thundering through the street was welcome to Mary, as being something to attract their attention from the wearisome and painful topic of Uncle Adderly's baseness; but, unusual as was the incident, it awoke no curiosity in Martha. She was repeating for the twentieth time that the man was a mean, insolent, cowardly hound, when suddenly the carriage pulled up at their door. Then indeed Martha started from her chair, and cried, "Good heavens!"

Someone had jumped out of the carriage, and was plying their tiny knocker with a vehemence that deserved a better result. It was like a fireman trying to arouse the inmates of a dolls' house. The little maid had gone to bed, so Martha herself answered the summons.

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"Miss Vance, I believe?" exclaimed the stranger, a short, stout gentleman, very much out of breath, and apparently labouring under great excitement. "Pray excuse this abrupt and untimely visit, but my business is of the greatest importance."

Martha bowed, and led him into the parlour.

"My sister Mary, Mr. ——"

"Rolfe, Rolfe," he put in hastily. "I am your uncle's—Mr. Adderly's—legal adviser."

"Indeed," said Martha icily.

The information was not a passport to her favour. The indifference of her tone was so very marked that it was impossible the lawyer could ignore it.

"I believe that your relations have been somewhat strained, ladies," he observed; "but something has occurred to him so distressing that I hardly like to speak of it, and which I am sure will cause you to forget at once any cause of animosity that may exist between you."

"Pray tell us, sir; I think I can bear it," replied Martha scornfully.

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Mr. Rolfe looked at her with horrified amazement. He presented the unusual spectacle of a lawyer shocked.

"Madam, if you had seen what I have seen——" and then he stopped, overwhelmed with a remembrance that made him shudder. "A dreadful outrage has been committed; some wretch—we know not whom—has thrown vitriol in his face. He is blinded, and one would hope, for his agony is terrible, dying. There is no one connected with him but yourselves; his cook-housekeeper is his only nurse at present."

"You should send for the doctor," observed Martha, in the tone of one who gives advice, without having the slightest personal interest in the subject.

"I have, of course, called at Dr. Gray's; but he is, unhappily, not at home."

Mary rose from the sofa and left the room without a word.

"My sister has been ill of late, Mr. Rolfe," continued Martha, in the same cold tones, "and I fear

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your narration has shaken her nerves. I hardly know why we have been favoured with it, nor, indeed, why you have called at all at such an untimely hour."

"But, good heavens! madam, you are my client's nieces, the only kith and kin he has in the world, and it seemed only natural, in view of so shocking an occurrence——"

"It was reasonable enough that you should think so," she interrupted calmly; "but we have nothing to do with Mr. Adderly, nor he with us. He is a mean, insolent, cowardly hound."

"But is it possible that you have not understood me? Your uncle is dying, and in torment."

"Then he knows now that there is a Providence," was the cold rejoinder. "You had better take Mr. Harden back with you; he will possibly be able to improve the occasion."

Here the door opened, and Mary entered with her bonnet and cloak on, and with a hand-bag in her hand.

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"Where are you going? What are you about to do?" exclaimed Martha angrily.

"I am going to the Hall to nurse my uncle," replied Mary firmly. "You have heard what Mr. Rolfe has told us. I cannot leave him to die among strangers and servants."

"Do you think George Waldron will approve of that?" observed Martha drily. "You yourself have but lately risen from a sick-bed; you purpose to go out at night, which Dr. Gray has forbidden, and perform an office for which your condition renders you wholly unfitted."

"George would never wish me to neglect my duty, Martha."

"Duty? Is it your duty to sacrifice your health, and perhaps your life, for the most worthless of living men?"

"Mr. Rolfe, I am ready," said Mary in a resolute voice, though her frail frame shook with agitation.

"I don't know what to do," murmured the lawyer

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doubtfully. "You really look very delicate, Miss Mary; if your sister could but be persuaded——"

"*I* persuaded?" interrupted Martha vehemently. "*I* nurse Joseph Adderly? I would not lift a finger to save him from perdition."

"Come, sir, we are wasting precious time," said Mary, leading the way to the door. Mr. Rolfe followed her; while Martha, motionless as a statue, regarded them with contemptuous eyes. Mary hurried into the carriage, but her companion delayed a moment to give some direction to the coachman ere he followed her.

"He is not taking the shortest way to the Hall," she exclaimed as they started off.

"I told him to call at the vicarage on the way," exclaimed her companion. "I am indebted to your sister for at least a word of good advice, and shall take Mr. Harden back with me. The responsibility is too much for one pair of shoulders."

If Mary had known of his intention she might have shrunk from her self-imposed task. It was very painful to her, in her present relations with

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him, to be thus thrown almost alone into Mr. Harden's company; but it was now too late to draw back, and impossible to explain her objections. The vicar had not yet gone to bed, but was reading in his study. Mr. Rolfe ran in and came out with him in less than a minute; he had not even informed him of Mary's presence in the carriage, but explained it in a few hasty words as the two shook hands.

"It is just what I should have expected of her," murmured the vicar.

Not another word was said as the carriage flew along the road. Presently, fast as they went, the doctor passed them on horseback at a gallop.

"Thank heaven, there is Gray!" exclaimed the lawyer fervently; "not that all the doctors in England could save poor Adderly's life."

"We cannot tell that for certain," observed the vicar gently.

"*You* cannot, because you have not seen him," answered the other, with a shudder. "No one would wish him to live, even if it were possible. His eyes

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are gone, except that the agony remains in them; his face is scarred beyond recognition. It was vitriol, of course; I could not have imagined a man could retain life and yet suffer so."

"Who could have possibly done it?"

"We don't know. He is conscious, I think, but replies to no questions. His only cry is, 'Kill me! kill me!'"

"Hush! hush!" whispered the vicar, and gripped the lawyer's arm. He saw that Mary's face was pale with horror. Then, in still lower tones, "I don't think she ought to see him."

But Mary's ears, as often happens when the nerves are strained to the uttermost, were more than usually acute.

"I am come to nurse him," she answered for herself; "if the poor man can bear his pain, we should at least be able to bear to see it."

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CHAPTER III.

BLINDED.

THERE are some houses the interiors of which are so stiff and formal that they seem hardly adapted for living in at all. They may be adapted for "receptions," but their apartments, however gorgeous, speak no more of home than the waiting-room of a railway-station. One can hardly imagine the ordinary incidents of life taking place there, far less those of the more sad and serious sort. Natchett Hall was a house of this kind. There was no trace of domesticity about it, no room manifestly devoted to infancy, or old age, or sickness; no provision for the misfortunes that are nevertheless certain, sooner or later, to befall the inmates of every household. The servants themselves were wholly unfitted to meet any such emergency; there was no motherly person, such as in the case of even bachelor mansions of

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the same rank is generally found to tend an invalid. It was no wonder that Mr. Rolfe, half distracted by a responsibility there was no one to share, had applied for help in his client's extremity to the only relatives he possessed in the world.

The spectacle Mr. Adderly had presented when he had first discovered him in the garden was of a nature indeed to deprive anyone not trained to look upon human suffering, and to minister to it, of his usual judgment. The ceaseless cries which his agony extorted from the poor wretch were terrible to listen to. Nor were these stifled even now. Dr. Gray had, however, done something. His patient's sightless eyes and frightfully disfigured features were covered with rags dipped in some soothing lotion, which afforded some slight relief; but it was in reality a doubtful advantage, since any increase of the pain he suffered might have driven him to what indeed was the only refuge to be hoped for, that of death.

At the foot of the great staircase, Mr. Harden, perceiving the nervousness from which, in spite of

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all her resolution, Mary was suffering, offered her his arm, which she thankfully accepted. As they followed to her uncle's room, it flashed across the vicar's mind that the sick man, on seeing them enter in such a fashion, might take it for granted that the engagement he had taken such useless pains to further had, after all, been accomplished.

The idea, momentary as it was, could never have occurred to him had he realized the position of the unhappy squire. He lay swathed and bandaged like a corpse, and with apparently as little interest as a corpse in anything around him, except for that melancholy appeal to the mercy of his fellow creatures, "Kill me! kill me!" which issued feebly from what had once been his lips.

The doctor, as the new-comers entered, was standing by his pillow, and with his back to the door. He knew from Mr. Rolfe's message, left at the surgery, that it had been the lawyer's intention to bring Martha Vance to the Hall, and he took it for granted that he had done so.

"Here is your niece Martha come to nurse you,

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Mr. Adderly," he said, in that assuring tone in which doctors address their patients.

The sick man raised himself in his bed with a yell, half of rage and half of pain. "My curse upon her! Keep her away!" he cried, then fell back all in a heap, like an empty sack, for the first time unconscious of his tortures.

"He is out of his mind," murmured Mary faintly.

"You must be out of your mind yourself to have come here," exclaimed the doctor. "It was not you, Harden, surely, who brought Mary?" he added, addressing the vicar with gravity. "Is this a sight for one in her weak state, and with her sensitive disposition? If she should take hurt by it, it is you who will have to answer for it to her friends."

"It was not Mr. Harden, Dr. Gray," put in the lawyer deprecatingly. "It is I alone who am to blame for the young lady's presence."

"You, sir? How dare you interfere with my patients? It is bad enough when the parsons do it, but what excuse can a lawyer offer for such an out-

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rage? If anything happens to the girl, by Heaven I'll indict you for manslaughter!"

The speaker was furious, and, in his indignation at the imprudence the other had committed, forgot that his own conduct was making things worse for the object of his solicitude. The doctor, though a most kind-hearted fellow, was a zealous stickler for his profession, and resented the least trespass on its privileges. Moreover, Mary was dear to him, and he was only too well convinced that to bring her to Natchett Hall at such an hour, and on such an errand, was to run a great risk.

"Do not blame Mr. Rolfe, dear Dr. Gray," said Mary, with her eyes fixed on that melancholy figure just beginning to toss and turn again upon the bed; "my coming here was quite a voluntary act. He naturally felt that my place—the place of one of us, at all events—was here."

The doctor shook his head. His private reflection was that not fifty Mr. Adderlys were worth the sacrifice—it might be of her very life—that Mary was making for him; but since she *was* here, she

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should at least be kept as quiet as possible. All that she could do, or anyone could do, for the wretched man, was to keep the bandages wet, and give him cordials, like the Good Samaritan pouring in oil and wine; and now she had seen him, the worst was over.

"Well, well, my dear, we won't talk about it," he answered; "you must stay here to-night, at all events; but since, as you have said yourself, your uncle is not in a condition to know what is going on, where is the use?"

"There is some woman in the room. Who is it?" cried the sick man. "I have said that I will not have Martha here. Never, never! if I can help it. Mr. Rolfe, Mr. Rolfe," here he gnashed his teeth and writhed in agony, "I wish to make my will."

"Not now, not to-night, sir; it is impossible," pleaded the lawyer, speaking from the doorway, beyond which he had never moved. ("I could not do it, even if *he* could," he murmured to the vicar.)

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"My will, my will!" murmured the wretched squire. "Oh kill me! kill me!"

"Such a document would not hold water, sir, I do assure you," pleaded Mr. Rolfe. "It would be" ("Dear me! how can I tell him he is *non compos mentis?*" whispered the poor man) "a waste of words."

It was not quite the ground for a lawyer to take up, to whom surplusage of that kind is scarcely an error; but the sick man's thoughts had fortunately wandered to another theme. "Where is she? Has she been found? Has she been caught? Will she be hung?"

The spectators looked at one another in horrified silence. The general impression was that the squire's mind was still concerning itself with Martha; but Mr. Rolfe, keener, from his professional training, to track suggestion to her cell, observed:

"Then it was a woman who threw the vitriol on you, Mr. Adderly?"

"No, it was not. It was Nancy. Nancy is a

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she-devil. If she is not here, and Martha is not here, who *is* the woman? Let her come to me."

"It is I, uncle—your niece Mary; I am come to nurse you."

The words were delivered in the most gentle and tender tones. She had walked steadily across the room, and was standing by the sick man's pillow with an expression of divinest pity. It was only the doctor who could guess what it cost her to obey that summons. She took the lotion, and with firm hands sprinkled it on the rags that enveloped his face.

"Mary," he murmured. "That's the best of them. That is not the one that called me a mean, insolent, cowardly hound. She is like her mother. I am better."

"Thank heaven for that, sir," exclaimed Mary fervently. As she looked up, she caught the doctor's eye; then she understood that her uncle was in such evil case that to feel better was a sign that the end was drawing nigh.

"The half, the half!" he groaned; "only to think

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of it is worse than even the pain! Marry him, Mary!" he whispered earnestly. "Marry him at once, I charge you, lest you should die, and she should have it all."

Mary shook her head despairingly. "What does he mean?" she murmured to the doctor, who was by her side. "What shall I say to him?"

"Say 'yes'; he does not know what he says, but he knows when he is crossed."

The girl murmured acquiescence.

"I say *at once,*" continued the unhappy man; "to delay is death—I have found it so—and she will kill you, as she has killed me, rather than not have her way. She wants it all, and she will have it all, thanks to that she-devil. For ten pounds she did it—for *ten pounds.*"

"This may be very important," observed the lawyer. "Mr. Harden, perhaps you will kindly make a note of that observation, for my hand shakes. Mr. Adderly tells us that the person who committed this outrage was bribed to do it. A deposition is out

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of the question in such circumstances, but perhaps you would put a question or two to him."

"If I spoke to him at all, it would not be on matters of this world," answered the vicar gravely; "but how is it possible?"

"Kill me! *kill* me!" broke forth the wretched man, as if in corroboration of the other's words; "have you no more mercy than *she* had? Where is my niece Mary?"

"Here I am, uncle. If there is anything in the world I can do for you——" she murmured despairingly.

"There *is*," he interrupted with a hushed vehemence; "put down your ear to me: don't let the doctor hear. If mercy is in your mind at all, if your heart is not as hard as a stone, or as your sister's is, give me poison; you would do it, if I asked you, to ease some dying dog of its pain; then surely you will do it for me. No one knows, no one guesses, what I suffer. A few drops of prussic acid, for the love of heaven!"

Mary looked up in the doctor's face appealingly.

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"I daren't do it, my dear," he muttered hoarsely. "If I were alone with him——"

"Clear the room," exclaimed the dying man in hollow tones. "I wish to be alone with Dr. Gray." Then his voice sank to a whisper: "No, *no,* not yet. Send Martha away; send Nancy away. That's what I told her mother. We must send Nancy away. But Mary may stop—Mary and the vicar. I feel much better. Let me join their hands; Mr. Rolfe, you will draw up a settlement. But I can't see! I can't see! I can't see!"

His voice faded away to nothing. Perhaps, blind though he was, he saw, even ere he had finished his plaint, many things unseen to the eyes of the rest, for he was no longer in this world. Joseph Adderly had passed away.

"Shock to the system, consequent on his terrible wounds," was the name that was given to the cause of his death. But what caused the cause? As she crept along unseen to the ha-ha, so did the wretched woman who had so terribly avenged her wrongs creep under cover of the night into Halsworth,

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where she hid herself among those of her own kind —women like herself, perhaps, who had had a past as different from their present as any future, no matter in what world, can be—a degraded and forsaken crew, poor and old and friendless; wretches who, whatever may be due to them in the matter of "compensation," have surely had punishment enough.

As to the outrage upon the squire, there was no clue to its perpetrator, save the phial found in the garden, which had the label of a New York chemist upon it. Fearing that her slender stock of money might give out before she reached Natchett Hall, the woman had purchased her means of vengeance at starting, and carried it, along with her rage and hatred, in her bosom, throughout her journey by sea and land. For weeks Joseph Adderly's fate had been approaching nearer and nearer to him, and when he had put his name to that fatal letter, refusing help at her last need to the woman he had ruined, he had, in fact, signed his doom. There are few places in this world where Cruelty and

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Wrong can soar so high but that the slow climber, Retribution, careless of a fall from heaven itself, will reach them sleeping in their downy nests.

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CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE NEWS WAS RECEIVED.

SHORT of leaving his fortune to the town of Natchett-on-Sea, Mr. Joseph Adderly could not have conferred a greater obligation on its inhabitants than in his mode of departure from them. It gave them "something to talk about" for a whole generation. Gossips like Mrs. Maitland he benefited of course beyond expression; he brought grist to their mill that kept it at work for their natural lives; but the whole population were indebted to him. In London, where one catastrophe succeeds another, as wave whelms wave, with reckless rapidity, such an event would have been thrown away; but at Natchett, where nothing happened except at sea, the story of the squire's death was hailed with shuddering rapture. It is very well to say that a neighbourhood is "shocked" by this and that terrible occurrence; but

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if it is of a dramatic kind, and the victim does not enlist the public sympathy, the shock is only of that semi-agreeable kind given by some drawing-room electrician, and evokes more speculation than dismay. It admits, too, of infinite variations. The first rumour that ran through Natchett on the morning after the squire's decease was that he had been bitten by a mad dog and died of hydrophobia. The dog was even identified with one of his own mastiffs, let loose upon the wandering poor (tramps) at night, and which, being out of its mind, mistook its master for one of them. It was much less unlikely and surprising, and not more horrible than what had actually happened. Something of the truth clings to the most monstrous account of an event, and it was at least certain that the squire had died in great agony. The news came to The Crag as to other places, and of course, made a considerable sensation.

"Poor, wretched man!" exclaimed Mrs. Waldron. But her pity for him was lost in the thought of how the catastrophe would distress Mary. George at

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once started off to the Cottage to make inquiries, and if the poor girl should not have heard of the news to break it to her.

When he had gone, the other members of his family began to discuss the matter.

"Let us hope," said Maggie, "that there was no time for Mr. Adderly to cut poor Martha's name out of his will."

"If he did that," observed Hetty decisively, "I beg to observe that no draft for sympathy for him need be presented at this bank, for there will be no effects."

"It is just possible, whatever may have been his intentions, that the man has left no will at all," remarked John Dennet. "It is often so with these resolute and relentless natures; they think that nothing can prevent their carrying out their own designs, and that even death itself will think twice before interfering with them."

"And what will happen then?" inquired Maggie breathlessly.

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The chance had seemed so small that it had never presented itself to her imagination.

"Well, Martha and Mary, of course, would be coheiresses."

"Oh, my goodness!" exclaimed Maggie.

"And mine," added Hetty gravely. "In that case we must be prepared to hear poor George stigmatized as a fortune-hunter."

"No human being alive who knows anything about him could possibly say that," observed Mrs. Waldron scornfully.

"Nevertheless, there is one woman living that knows him, or thinks she knows him, who will most certainly say it," replied Hetty drily.

"For shame!" said Mrs. Waldron reprovingly.

"Oh, Hetty, how can you talk so?" murmured Maggie plaintively.

"Look at John's face; don't look at mine," continued Hetty quietly. "There you can read counsel's opinion without paying a guinea for it. Mr. John Dennet is with me in this case, specially retained from the common law. I am confident of it."

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"Yes," he said; "I am with you."

"I am sorry to hear you say so," said Mrs. Waldron gravely. "I would rather that Mr. Adderly should have left all he had elsewhere than that any such feeling should be aroused about anyone connected with us."

"My *dear* Mrs. Waldron!" exclaimed John Dennet.

He added no other word, but what his tone said was, "I honour and revere you beyond anything, but this view of yours is mere midsummer madness."

Hetty laughed aloud. "What John is thinking is that if Maggie and I were suddenly found to be coheiresses, he would not care about my calling him a fortune-hunter, but would stick to his engagement."

"I should stick to it all the more," observed John frankly; "and as for calling names, anybody may call me what they like for forty shillings, even now. If Maggie was a coheiress they might do it for nothing: to that extent wealth would make me generous."

"I like John!" exclaimed Hetty admiringly; "his

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views are practical, if his principles are low; he suits me down to the ground. If you are getting tired of him, Maggie, as you well may be, I'll take him off your hands."

"I have always loved you, Hetty," murmured the young lawyer. "If we had only met one another earlier, before Maggie——" But Maggie had seized him by the ear, and he had to fall upon his knees and beg her pardon in the most humiliating fashion.

Since the news of Mr. Adderly's death was thus received by those who, though not, indeed, related to him, were at all events more nearly connected with him than other people, with how little regret the public at large received it may be guessed.

His only relative—that is, the only one who did not know of the event—heard the tidings long before it reached The Crag, from Dr. Gray. That gentleman had stayed the night at the Hall, not because of the patient to whose case he had been summoned, for he had passed, as we know, beyond his aid, but for Mary's sake. She had "kept up"

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as long as there had been any need for "keeping up;" but with her uncle's death her slender stock of strength had failed her. She had been carried into one of the great comfortless bed-chambers and looked after, as far as possible, by the cook-housekeeper, who was exceedingly respectful and attentive. Everyone at Natchett Hall understood the golden possibilities that surrounded a niece of Mr. Adderly's as with a halo, and paid her the devotion that was her due.

Early as it was, the doctor found Martha already risen. She had, indeed, passed a night overpowered by vehement and anxious emotions, and was glad enough to escape from her sleepless pillow.

He fastened his horse to the gate and came quickly up the little garden, but she had opened the door to him before he rang, and led the way into the breakfast-room, where the table was not even laid for the morning meal.

"I am sorry to say I have bad news for you, Miss Martha," were his first words.

"I expected nothing else," she answered coldly;

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"if it had been good news, I should have said, 'Break it to me gently,' because I am not used to it." Her tone was bitter, her face defiant.

"What Mr. Rolfe led you to anticipate, as I understand, from his account of your unfortunate uncle, has come to pass: Mr. Adderly is dead. Considering his terrible sufferings, no one could have wished it to be otherwise."

"I, at all events, did not wish it to be otherwise," was Martha's calm rejoinder. "The best thing he could do with such a life as his was to end it. I don't expect you to sympathize with me in that remark," she continued, noting her companion's look of dissent. "Your mission is to prolong lives, however mean or mischievous; well, you could not prolong this one, it seems."

"No; I could do little even to assuage your uncle's sufferings; indeed, I think your sister's presence was more useful than mine; her behaviour was admirable under the most trying circumstances."

"Then it must have been worthy of a better cause," was the dry rejoinder.

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"I don't know about that. If, as I understand you to imply, she had cause of quarrel with that unhappy man who has gone to his account, she was returning good for evil. And I am sorry to say she has suffered for it."

"Of course she has. It does not need a doctor to tell me that. Her leaving her own sick-room to attend upon someone else miles away at midnight was little short of an act of suicide. If I could have stopped her I would have done it."

"You might have stopped her, permit me to observe, Miss Martha, by going yourself."

"That idea, however, never occurred to me for one single moment. It was, indeed, suggested to me by some foolish, frightened person—Mr. Adderly's lawyer, I believe." Here a spasm passed over her face. "When I say that if the lifting of this little finger would have restored your patient to ease and life, Dr. Gray, I would not have lifted it, you will perceive that it would be waste of time to discuss that matter further."

"What I have to say, then, is that your sister,

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overcome by the excitement and distress she experienced last night, is seriously unwell. There is no one to look after her at the Hall; you must, therefore, either go to her yourself——"

"I will not go to the Hall. The same roof shall never cover me and that mean, insolent, cowardly hound."

"Hush, hush, madam; the man is dead, remember," interrupted the doctor indignantly.

"That makes him no better. I will not be beholden to him—or his heirs—for so much as a night's lodging."

"Then your sister must be brought back home at once. There will be a risk in it, but it is absolutely necessary that she should receive instant attention. Mr. Adderly's carriage, will, of course, bring her. I will look in again this afternoon."

He nodded without shaking hands, and let himself out at the front door. "What a vengeful vixen she is!" he thought to himself. Still, from what the squire had said about her with almost his last breath, there had, it was clear, been no love lost

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between them. Fortunately Mary had not seemed to understand to whom he was referring when he said, "She will kill you as she has killed me, rather than not have her way." He had not been quite in his right mind, or he would not have said, "as she has killed me;" but it had been obvious enough to the doctor that he was speaking of Martha. How strange it would be if his money should revert to his nieces, after all! Mr. Rolfe had told the doctor that, so far as he knew, the squire had made no will, though on the very day of his death he had sent for the lawyer for that purpose; but, nevertheless, there might be a will. He had never treated Mr. Rolfe (nor anyone else) with confidence, and was naturally secretive and underhand. In the meantime there had to be an inquest—another reason (though a slight one, for the Hall was large enough to admit of such things taking place without inconveniencing its inmates) why Mary should be removed to her own home. Upon the whole, much as he resented Martha's attitude in the matter, the doctor thought this the preferable plan; he fore-

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saw that Mary would have a relapse, and supposing she could bear removal, the Cottage was a better hospital for her than the Hall.

CHAPTER V.

"BUT YOU THOUGHT IT WAS MARY'S PLACE."

When Mary Vance awoke in the morning, after a broken and feverish night, it was some time before she could make plain to herself where she was or what had happened. She experienced a difficulty of breathing, to which she was not a stranger, and a sense of exhaustion that was new to her. In spite of this latter she arose and dressed without assistance. The necessity of returning to the Cottage in time for George's morning call, so that he should suffer no anxiety from her absence, spurred her to this task; but having accomplished it, she felt that she could do no more. If she had been at home, Dr. Gray would certainly have ordered her to bed again; but, under the circumstances, he per-

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mitted a compromise. If Martha should decline to come to the Hall, which, from what he knew of her, he thought quite possible, it was as well that Mary should be in a condition to be taken to Natchett; so she was laid on the sofa in one of the large sitting-rooms looking on the garden, the windows of which he took care should be free from the drawn-down blinds that everywhere else marked the presence of death in the house. The servants, who felt not one spark of regret for their late master, were very punctilious on this point, and, but for his orders, would have plunged her in artificial gloom. As it was, she was refreshed by the sight of the grass and flowers, and little guessed that she was looking out on the very spot where her uncle had met his doom the previous evening.

It was difficult for her to collect her thoughts at all, or to fix them on any subject. The one which might have been expected to monopolize them—the terrible scene she had witnessed on the previous evening—did not intrude itself at all. Her mind was almost a blank, on which only events of the im-

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mediate present made any impression. The song of the birds, the scent of the flowers, the freshness of the morning air, as she lay beside the open window, were pleasant to her. She was conscious that she was alive, and even in the enjoyment of life, but little more; she felt, as she afterwards described it, like one who has just recovered from a dangerous and lingering illness, whereas, on the contrary, she was on the threshold of one, and approaching it, as it were, from the other side.

"There is serious mischief brewing," had been the doctor's remark to himself when he had parted from her at a late hour on the previous night; and his diagnosis had been only too correct. Where he had been mistaken was in supposing that she would have been too ill to rise in the morning—that the delicate machinery of her constitution would have utterly run down; whereas the wheels still feebly revolved.

There are certain wounds which, being inflicted on the human body, cause no pain, but are, nevertheless, mortal. To unskilled eyes Mary Vance ap-

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peared, indeed, to be an invalid, weary and worn with the experiences she had so lately undergone, but not "what one calls ill."

Mr. Rolfe, who was the first to visit her, was struck by her delicate looks, which, nevertheless, enhanced her beauty.

"I hope you are no worse, Miss Mary," he said tenderly, "for your journey hither, and all the painful circumstances of last night. I should never forgive myself if—if——"

He hesitated in some alarm, for though she smiled upon him, there was a vacant expression in her face, as though his words had no meaning for her.

"You are very kind," she murmured.

"Not at all," he answered earnestly, "though I should like to be. Please to remember, if at any time I can be of any use to you, that the services of Peter Rolfe are at your disposal."

"Mr. Rolfe, of Halsworth?" she exclaimed, with a sudden energy, like a child who is astonished that it understands, and which left her panting.

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"Yes, that is our country house of business; but our firm is a London one—Courtney and Rolfe, Lincoln's Inn Fields. Your uncle Joseph——"

She put up her hand to her forehead with a look of distress and pain. He felt that he should have made no allusion to Mr. Adderly.

"Here is the address, lest you should forget it," he added hastily, placing a card in her hand, which she took mechanically.

"Forget! I can never forget," she said, with a shudder.

"Well, well, we will not talk about that. I wanted to say a word to you about business matters, but that will keep. I will speak of them to your sister Martha instead."

"Where is Martha?" she inquired in a whisper. To raise her voice was to lose her breath.

"Well, she is at home, I suppose, just now. Dr. Gray has gone over to Natchett; perhaps he will bring her back."

From what Mr. Rolfe had seen of Martha he did not think this very probable; still, he felt bound to

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prophesy smooth things. Indeed, it seemed that the mention of her sister's name had given his companion new life. A radiant smile overspread her features.

At this moment the vicar entered the room, but Mary took no notice of him; her eyes were fixed upon the sky, across which a white cloud was sailing. He had been about to speak, but as he looked at her his face fell and he was silent.

"Miss Mary feels a little weak this morning," exclaimed Mr. Rolfe in a whisper; "but she is getting better. Has Gray returned?"

The vicar nodded, but without withdrawing his gaze from the invalid.

"I hope she is going home," continued the lawyer in the same hushed voice, which had even a tone of alarm in it. I am sure that home would be the best place for her."

"Home, home, home; it's home I fain would be," murmured the girl gently.

Her eyes were still fixed yearningly on the sky.

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The vicar looked up at it too, and his lips moved without speaking.

"She wants to go to her sister," murmured the lawyer. "This place does not suit her. She had scarcely any breakfast at all, the housekeeper told me. Thank goodness! I hear the carriage wheels."

"Dr. Gray is going to take you back to Natchett, Mary," said the vicar softly.

"To George?" she answered, with an eager look.

"Yes," he said, with a smile that cost him dearly, "and to George."

She closed her eyes, and over her face there crept a look of ineffable tenderness and tranquillity. When the doctor came she was unconscious.

"It is better so," he said, but in a voice that somewhat belied his words. "We will lift her into the carriage as she is. You will come with us, of course, Harden."

"Not unless I can be of use, doctor. Pray do not press it," he whispered, in a broken voice. "I will ride your horse back.

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And so it happened that the doctor took his patient home alone.

The rapid passage through the air, with both the carriage windows down (for she pined for air, he knew), revived her.

"What is the matter?" she inquired quietly. "Where am I?"

"On the road to the Cottage, my dear," said the doctor cheerfully, "where your sister is looking out for us, you may be sure. What a lovely autumn morning, is it not?"

"But I am *so* tired," she murmured. "Why am I so tired?"

"It is the morning air. You will be better when you have had some sleep. Then you shall see George."

"Ah!" Only a monosyllable, yet, like the grateful sound that follows the first draught of water from lips that have been parched with thirst, it expressed a world of happiness and content.

Then, after awhile, "I have had such dreadful dreams, doctor."

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"Don't think about them, my dear; think about George."

"But I must tell him, for I tell him everything. I dreamt that Martha murdered Uncle Adderly."

"What rubbish!"

"But he is dead, is he not?"

"Well, yes; that is so."

"And he was murdered?"

"No one has any authority to say that. It is not your business, nor mine either, and certainly not Martha's; so do not talk to her about it. I shall not let George see you unless you promise me to avoid the subject with him, too. You did all that you could do for your uncle, and far more than you ought to have done; and the less said the soonest mended. Pray let us hear no more about it."

It pained the good doctor to speak to the poor girl so harshly, but it was absolutely necessary to divorce her mind from the events which had lately agitated her. Harm in every way had come of her visit to the Hall: she had taken cold, and mischief was at work again in the old quarter; but what she

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was suffering from most seriously and immediately was the shock to her system caused by her recent experiences. The doctor was a church-going man, but what gave his anxious mind most relief at present was muttering to himself over and over again, "Hang that fellow Rolfe!" There were other persons, however, who shared his displeasure. To use his own homely expression, he had already "seen enough" of Miss Martha that morning, but now it became necessary to see more of her.

Her reception of her sister was full of tender solicitude; but not a word of regret escaped her as to her own conduct in refusing to go to the Hall, and thereby compelling Mary's presence there.

"I am afraid there will be all that uphill work with your sister, which we have with such difficulty surmounted, to do over again," said the doctor, when they had left Mary in her room. "It is altogether a most lamentable affair."

"I am very, very sorry as regards Mary," replied Martha.

She was resolute not to admit that there was

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anything lamentable in what had happened to Mr. Adderly.

"She must be kept very quiet," pursued the doctor. "We must take especial care that the subject of your uncle's death is not alluded to in her presence, nor anything, in fact, connected with him," he added emphatically.

This was a blow to Martha; for though she was far too proud to ask for any information on the matter, she was eager for news from the Hall, and had depended upon extracting it from Mary; and the prohibition made the parting between the doctor and herself even more stiff than it otherwise would have been.

As he left the Cottage he saw George Waldron coming up the hill. Had he kept on his way he would have met him, but he purposely took another road. His courage had failed him; he could not tell the young fellow the news that was awaiting him, and of which it was clear, by his fresh, smiling face, he had not heard. Still less could he tell him the apprehensions that Mary's condition had aroused

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in him; they might prove to be mistaken, and, at all events, it was not his duty to relate the imprudence of which the poor girl had been guilty the previous night. "Let Martha tell him," whose obstinacy had imposed upon her sister a task to which she had been so unequal, was his reflection.

George came on with his quick step, and a glance at the window where he had often seen a sweet face full of welcome and expectancy; but it was not there this morning. The little maid who opened the door to him answered nothing to his usual pleasant "Good-morning." She shrank from giving so kind a gentleman pain, and ushered him at once into the parlour, where Martha, with pale face, received him.

"Mary is not very well this morning, I am sorry to say."

"Not well?" he said, as he dropped her hand like a stone. "It is nothing serious, I trust?"

"Let us hope not," she answered; "but Dr. Gray —did you meet him? for he has just left the house

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—has prescribed rest and quiet. She has had a shock."

"I know," he replied gravely.

Then the doctor *had* met him, thought Martha, with a sense of relief; he had told George what had occurred, and the worst, so far as she was concerned, was over.

"The manner of your uncle's death, as well as the event itself," he went on, "would, I feared, affect her. It is most unfortunate, since Gray had always told us, you remember, that she should avoid excitement of any kind. Is she—that is, cannot I see her?"

"I am afraid not; the doctor said 'perfect quiet,' and when she is seen the subject of her uncle's death must be studiously avoided."

"Poor dear! poor *darling!*" His honest face was tender and sad as twilight. "When did she hear of it?"

Martha's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She had not liked George Waldron, but she had never before been afraid of him.

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"She heard of Mr. Adderly's illness last night, which, I am sorry to say, induced her to go to him."

"To *go* to him! Do you mean that she went to Natchett Hall last night?"

His tone was one of simple amazement.

"Yes. She went to nurse him; that was her notion—a most mistaken one, I need not say. My uncle's lawyer" (it was curious that she should have thought it necessary to be so explanatory, but Mr. Rolfe always presented himself to her mind in that capacity, rather than as having any individuality of his own) "called here in his carriage, and she volunteered to return with him."

"And you permitted her to do so?"

"I could not prevent her. Mr. Rolfe is the person to blame. It was an officious and unwarrantable act on his part. Mr. Adderly had no claim upon us whatever."

"And this man persuaded Mary, obviously unfitted as she was for any such ordeal, that it was her duty to return with him, did he?"

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"Not in the first instance. He had appealed to me, and I had refused to go; I would refuse to-morrow if he came again. Mr. Adderly was nothing to me; he was less and worse than nothing. It was not my place (as he chose to term it), and so I told him."

"But you thought it was Mary's place. You indulged your own animosity against your uncle at the expense of your sick sister. You didn't care if it killed her——"

"Mr. Waldron!" exclaimed Martha, with flashing eyes.

"You are right; I should not have said that," he admitted gravely. "I beg your pardon. I will not trust myself to say another word."

He took up his hat, and, as if afraid lest he should be led into temptation, walked hurriedly out of the room.

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CHAPTER VI.

WHO SHALL BE HEIR?

RUMOUR, like the human voice, gets more indistinct and untrustworthy the farther it goes, while to those in the neighbourhood of its source it is more dependable, especially on repetition; and though the world at large was informed by numerous paragraphs that the squire of Natchett Hall had died of hydrophobia, and was being admonished of the peculiar susceptibility to rabies of the common (or garden) mastiff, the inhabitants of Natchett-on-Sea were in possession of the actual particulars of his decease. Everyone knew that he had died from the injuries consequent upon the effects of a bottle of vitriol being thrown at him, but that the outrage had been inflicted on him by "a person unknown" still gave numerous opportunities for discussion. At the Spa, of whose healing waters Miss Martha

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Vance, we may be sure, no longer tested the efficacy, it was an endless topic of conversation. The squire's connection with the spot made it a fit and proper place for such talk, and old Sarah Jones was appealed to as an authority upon the matter, as having been so long his dependent. Instead of being puffed up by this access of popularity, she, however, resented it exceedingly. So far from demonstrating a feudal fidelity to her late master, or loyalty to the fountain of health over which she presided, she expressed her opinion that it was "as like as not" that the person who threw the vitriol had "been put out" by the Spa water, and had administered to its proprietor in revenge a still more offensive and unwholesome fluid.

But the village post-office was naturally the headquarters of general gossip. Besides its ordinary business, it was an emporium for all things a matron of Natchett could need, including a circulating library. Of new books there were none—the phrase "in connection with Mudie's" had at that time never been heard of—but it had some books that would be new

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to modern readers. There were a few tales of fashionable life, wherein no one under the rank of a baronet was admitted among the *dramatis personæ,* and one-third of the conversation was in the French language; but its contents were chiefly melodramatic narratives, such as "The One-Handed Monk" and "The Children of the Abbey," works which would have incurred Mr. Howell's severest criticism. One may imagine how readers of this class of literature, coming to change second for third volumes, talked to other readers about recent events at the Hall. They knew why the squire had had vitriol thrown in his face, though the coroner's jury at the inquest could offer no explanation of the circumstance. Poor Mrs. Maitland, with her miserable local suggestion, "I wonder whether Martha Vance herself did it?" thrown out in a moment of purblind inspiration, fared ill at the hands of these students of human nature; they soared above her cheap explanations into regions of such sublime romance as took her breath away. It was the hand of a neglected wife who had thus revenged herself upon him. What

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gave this solution of the matter its chief charm was that it afforded a clue to the disposition of his property; for it was not for her own sake that she had taken such strong measures, but for that of his unacknowledged babe. The slur of illegitimacy should never rest upon its innocent head. Not until it was too late did it occur to this creature of impulse that the charge of wilful murder preferred against its mother would also be a slur. In proving her rights there would now be considerable danger as well as difficulty; but whatever happened, here was the rightful heir.

This romance of real life was as freely circulated in Natchett—and not among subscribers to the library only—as those in book form, and greatly relished. Enthralling as were the particulars of the squire's decease, they were not comparable in point of interest to the question, "To whom has his money gone?" The possession of it had been the only circumstance which had invested him with importance during life, and it was therefore but natural that the public attention should be now tranferred

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to its next proprietor. However fleeting fame may be, it is as a granite rock to Albert rock (the sweetmeat) compared with the reputation of the mere possessor of millions, which the moment the breath is out of his body flies to the next heir. Beside the supposititious, or rather supposed, child above alluded to, there were many imaginary claimants to the squire's wealth, all of whom had their advocates; but, what was fatal to their attractions, they were impersonal—"boards" and "trusts" and governors for the time being. Some said he had founded a college, others a hospital, others a lunatic asylum. One very popular idea (in the locality) was that he had left it to build a breakwater at Natchett—a design which to Mr. Adderly himself would have seemed literally like "throwing money into the sea." There was, however, nothing too monstrous for imagination to conceive; upon this entrancing topic it ran riot. The only direction, indeed, in which it did not run was that to which common-sense and likelihood would have pointed, but for the squire's repeated declarations to the contrary. No one believed it possible, who had

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heard him talk of them, that his only relatives should be his heirs. Least of all did they themselves believe it possible.

As for poor Mary, indeed, the speculation never crossed her mind. When her condition permitted her to think at all, she thought of George: how sorry he would be to know that she had fallen ill again; how disappointed he would be at not seeing her; what a trouble and nuisance she was to everybody. She did, indeed, think of her uncle and his unhappy end, but as little as she could help; the doctor had told her it was bad for her, which meant bad for George, and she had therefore shut out that terrible recollection as far as possible. As for his money, it had never been a subject of attraction to her, and was certainly none now.

But with Martha it was very different. She had no hopes, but she could not prevent her mind from dwelling constantly upon the subject. Her resentment against the dead man was stronger even than when he had been alive. It was through him that Mary had got a relapse, or something that might

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even turn out to be worse than a relapse. It was through him that she had quarrelled with George Waldron. That was not quite the word, perhaps, but the effect of their late interview had been the same. He had reproached her, not without justice, as the cause of Mary's illness. If he had not actually said what he thought of her conduct, he had only restrained himself for Mary's sake—because Martha was her sister—and by look and manner had made it abundantly plain. It was a gross impertinence in him, she tried to persuade herself; but in her heart, though far from excusing him, she knew it was not so. He had had a right to be angry.

On the other hand, she asked herself indignantly, had not she also a right? However faulty might be her reasoning, she was fully convinced, in her own mind, of having been subjected to the most infamous ill-treatment at the hands of that "mean, insolent, cowardly hound," for whom the worms were waiting. He had thrown his alms to her, not as a man throws bones to his dog, with cheerfulness and good nature, but with bitter and contemptuous words. But for

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the suddenness of his end he would have left her almost a beggar.

As it was, he had probably had no time to alter his intentions (as he had certainly meant to do) with respect to that miserable sum he had promised to leave her. She had no friends to be called such: those who were most inclined towards her—the Waldrons—had been friendly more for her sister's sake than her own; and they would be henceforth set against her, for they would, of course, take George's view. There was not a soul to sympathize with her trouble. Her lips, as respected her position with the family at The Crag, were sealed, of course, to Mary; nor could she relieve her mind to her by speaking of her wrongs; her sister had never agreed with her about them, and even if the subject of Mr. Adderly had not been forbidden by the doctor, she must needs have kept silence upon it. Yet, with this topic, almost to the exclusion of any other, Martha's thoughts were ever busy. She knew that it was harmful to her, but what did that matter to one so miserable, so helpless, and so wronged? It was but mixing

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aloes with with wormwood, and made things no worse.

But others perceived its ill effects without guessing its cause. She was like one who in secret indulges himself in some deleterious drug, and at whose hollow cheeks and haggard eyes men about him wonder. Not that there was much change in Martha's physical appearance; her thin lips tightened a little, and her face was mirthless; but she had always been, for her age, somewhat austere-looking; the alteration was in her manner, which, except when in attendance upon her sister, had become cold and irresponsive as a stone. Narrow means, the necessity of "cutting and contriving" to make both ends meet, had had, as usual, where the disposition is not naturally cheerful, a chilling effect upon her character, and the continual dripping of resentment against her uncle (culminating in that ice-cold "Then he knows now there is a Providence") had petrified her heart. She had "nothing to do with Mr. Adderly now," as she had said, "nor he with her," and yet she could not bring

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herself to be indifferent to the question, "How had he left his money?"

Indifferent? It absorbed her very soul! She had read somewhere in the papers of a miser who, to spite his wife and children, had changed all his fortune to bank-notes, and on his death-bed burnt them. It was an example, she thought, the squire would have been just the man to follow, if he had only had the time for it. It did not strike her that in so doing the financial incendiary had simply made the bank his heirs instead of his relatives, and far less that the fancy value which the squire attached to his wealth would have always prevented him from destroying it. Her mind dwelt upon the incident as though it had had some actual relation to him, and such a disposition of his property would have undoubtedly given her more satisfaction than the reflection that it had gone into other hands, even the Dead Hand.

The only person who had had the indelicacy to speak with her upon the subject had been Mrs. Maitland. That indefatigable gossip had set her

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brain on fire by a word she had spoken to her in the street one day: "Why, supposing the squire should not make a will, Miss Martha, you and Miss Mary would get his money, after all."

It was not a novel idea, of course, to her; far from it. It was one that had intruded itself upon her mind a thousand times, but always to be cast out again with a sort of contemptuous fury. How could she be such a fool as to believe for one instant in a thing so monstrously improbable? It was as though a native of the desert should suffer himself to be imposed upon by the mirage.

But somehow, now that the suggestion had been thus made to her by another, she could not dismiss it so summarily. That the squire had sent for Mr. Rolfe to make his will was known; it had come out at the inquest, but there had been no hint of his not having made one before; all the probabilities were the other way. He had probably made many wills; and perhaps the last one did not even contain the scanty provision for his nieces that he had undertaken to make. On the other hand, it

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was just possible that he *might* not have made any will at all.

It is fair to say that Mary did not suffer in Martha's regard from any of these bitter thoughts, nor even from the monopoly which the question, "Where is that man's money gone?" exercised over her mind. Though nothing could have persuaded her to acknowledge herself to blame for her sister's illness, she tended her with a kindness and assiduity that might have been the offspring of the most generous repentance. She even schooled herself to reply in fitting terms to all the poor girl's inquiries about her darling George. It was gall and wormwood to her to speak of him in such tender fashion, but she did it; nevertheless, though she sincerely lamented Mary's illness, the reflection that it separated her from her lover was to Martha Vance a distinct source of satisfaction.

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CHAPTER VII.

BREAKING IT.

THE burial of Squire Adderly was probably the most exciting incident that Natchett had ever witnessed; it was the only gratuitous treat he had ever given to anybody, and was appreciated accordingly, especially by the class whom he would have deprived, if he could, of their periwinkles. Not a tear dimmed the spectacle; there were no mourners. In that old-fashioned and sequestered place it was not at all unusual for the female relatives of the dead to attend their obsequies; but the presence of one of the squire's nieces was prevented, of course, by her illness, and no one expected Miss Martha to show any respect for the deceased.

Everybody was aware of what she had thought of him during life, and—especially within the last few days—of what he had thought of her. Those

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who had witnessed his last hours were persons with a high sense of duty, or, at the least (as was Mr. Rolfe's case), of a wholesome knowledge of what was right and proper, and by no means given to gossip; yet somehow or other it leaked out that he had expressed himself about his elder niece in very vehement and antagonistic terms. Whatever is said before witnesses, even at a Cabinet Council, sworn to secrecy, always does leak out. The report made no great sensation at the time—the time was too rife with sensation—but it was remembered afterwards.

Mr. Rolfe had made creditable attempts to secure the attendance of some respectable persons at the funeral. He thought that some members of the committee of the hospital which had owed so much to Mr. Adderly's benefactions during life might have put in an appearance; but as the invitation had been unaccompanied by any hint of further favours of a testamentary character it was not accepted.

Dr. Gray was present at the ceremony, and of

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course Mr. Rolfe himself. When all was over the lawyer repaired to the vicarage, where he remained till the crowd had dispersed. He had a visit to make, and wished to do so without exciting public attention. It was not to a client, but to one he had every reason to hope would become his client. This errand took him, somewhat late in the afternoon, to the Cottage. He had smiled to himself a little cynically as he had passed it at an earlier hour in the mourning coach, on observing that whereas almost all the other dwellings of gentility had had their blinds drawn down out of respect (to a man who had died worth a hundred thousand pounds), this residence wore no such habiliment of woe. It, of course, wore none such now; but it was quiet and melancholy enough. The little garden in front—Mary's peculiar care—looked neglected, and the present observer, used to the estimation of house property, noted that absence of paint and lack of repair in the dwelling itself so symptomatic of means without margin. The windows were all more or less open, for the afternoon was a warm one, but

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not a sound came through them; a caller hardly needed the notice, written in a neat, womanly hand, "Please ring gently," tied to the bell-handle, to tell him that there was sickness in the house. So significant was the appeal that, full as was the lawyer's mind of quite another matter, the first question he put to the little maid who opened the door to him, but only half-way, to imply "no admission," was:

"How is Miss Mary?"

"A little better, sir—just a trifle, the doctor says," she replied gravely, and the tears came into her eyes as she said it, for her young mistress was a very kind one. Then she wiped her hand on her apron, and held it out for the visitor's card, for he was a stranger to her.

"Can I see Miss Martha?" he asked.

"She is with Miss Mary, sir, just now. I don't think——"

"Give her this card," he put in authoritatively, "and say I will not detain her five minutes. If she is engaged I will wait for her in the parlour." And

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with a gentle insistence he pushed past the astonished Susan into the apartment in question.

Though poorly furnished, it bore tokens, to an eye that understood such matters, of being a lady's room; but it was its bareness and lack of ornament that struck the lawyer. He had been in it, as we know, before, but on that occasion there had been nothing incongruous in its poverty. He was now regarding it from the point of view of comparison, which made a great difference.

"I suppose a ten-pound note," he said to himself, with a grim smile, as he looked around him, "would buy the whole lot of this. Begad, it will be a change for them."

He had hardly made the reflection before Martha entered the room. It was not a week since he had seen her last, but he perceived a great alteration in her. She looked paler and thinner, and even older; that resolute and contemptuous expression which her face had worn, the stiffness of her attitude, the haughtiness of her manner, had gone. She stood in

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the doorway, speechless and trembling from head to foot. Her sister, he thought, must be very ill.

"I am afraid, Miss Martha," he murmured, "that my visit is very inopportune. I was in hopes, from what your maid said, that Miss Mary was slightly better. My business is of great importance, or I should have hesitated to call upon you at such a time."

"My sister *is* better, thank you," she answered, in a hushed and broken voice. "But I have had a very anxious time. Pray be seated," but she herself still remained standing, with her hand clutching the back of a chair.

"I came here upon a matter of business at the earliest time at which it was possible to do so, yet not so early as I should have wished, since it is never too soon to bring good news."

A faint flush spread over Martha's face; she put her hand to her bosom, as though to still its pulsation, and dropped into her chair.

"I am not *sure* about it, you must understand," he continued cautiously, "even now. There is still

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room, I am sorry to say, for disappointment, but I do not think there will be disappointment. I had brought this letter with me—which I will leave with you—in case I should have been so unfortunate as not to have found you at home; but I could not resist the pleasure of telling you, if possible, such great and good news with my own lips. So far as I can tell, after long and minute search, your uncle, the late Mr. Joseph Adderly, has died intestate."

There was no reply. Martha's eyes still remained fixed on the lawyer's face, from which they had never moved; but they had no longer any speculation in them—speculation, indeed, in its literal sense, was of course over with her, but her senses seemed to have fled with it. Her limbs were rigid; the lawyer thought she had fainted. He rose hastily from his chair with the intention of summoning assistance, but she made—automatically, as a semaphore puts out its arm—a prohibitory gesture.

"Do not ring," she whispered hoarsely. "Your news is unexpected, and I am not used to good news, that is all."

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"It is very good news, Miss Martha, both for yourself and your sister," continued the lawyer soothingly; "and yet I hope not too good to be true. I have been for many years your uncle's legal adviser—not, indeed, a very confidential one, for he was not accustomed to give his confidence to anybody, but I am well acquainted with his business affairs; and as his coheiresses my belief is that you will inherit not less than fifty thousand pounds apiece. After all, you see," he added, "it has come to you just as if he had been saving, all these years, for your especial behoof."

If he said this, as was possible, from a desire to mitigate her animosity against his lost client, it failed in its effect.

"You may think me ungrateful, Mr. Rolfe," she said, "but there is not one thought of gratitude in my heart as regards Joseph Adderly, except this one, that I am thankful to know that before he died he heard from my own lips what I thought of him, and think of him still: that he was a mean, insolent, cowardly hound."

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It is as difficult to shock a lawyer in good practice (Mr. Rolfe had plenty of clients) as a physician, but he was very near being shocked; in all his professional experience he had never heard such language applied by a lady to a gentleman whose property she had just inherited.

"That man, sir," she went on, in icy tones, "of whom you are doubtless saying to yourself, 'She ought at least to speak of him with decency,' was my mother's brother. If he ever cared for anyone in this wide world except himself, or so he led her to believe, he cared for her; yet, because she married a poor man, he turned his back upon her. Even when her husband died, so far from forgiving her, he left her to face poverty, though well knowing how unfitted was her sensitive and feeble frame to do so. As a man might watch a fellow-creature drowning, and never so much as hold out his hand to aid him, so this heartless wretch witnessed her fruitless struggles till she succumbed to them. When she was gone, it is true, for very shame, he gave us —her children—certain beggar's alms, but with such

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insults as no beggar wonld have put up with; and now, because he is dead, why should I hold him a less vile creature than his life proclaimed him? He did not die to please me. If anything could bring him to life again, it would be the bitter knowledge that his hoarded wealth has fallen, after all, into the very last hands to which he would have bequeathed it! No, Mr. Rolfe, I cannot say I am grateful to your client."

"I need hardly say, I hope, Miss Martha, that I was unaware, or at least only partially aware," observed the lawyer, "of this painful story. I knew that your mutual relations were strained, but if I had known all" (here he looked unutterable things, and among them the observation, "I should have refused to act for him," but confined himself to saying), "it would have made business connections with such a man as you describe exceedingly unpleasant. From what I gathered from your sister——"

"Say at once, Mr. Rolfe," she interrupted, "that from what you *saw* of my sister, you took her for a much more charitable and Christian person than

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myself. It is quite true, and does not offend me in the least. Mary is a Patient Grisel, while I have none of the patience and a great deal of the grizzle. Still, you will find no difficulty, I hope, in getting on with me in matters of business."

"Indeed, my dear madam, I foresee none," answered the lawyer earnestly. "The interests of my clients are *my* interests."

"Just so," put in Miss Martha drily; "there cannot be a stronger bond. I shall henceforward place every confidence in your advice with regard to the administration of our affairs. My sister is not at present in a condition to receive the unexpected news you have brought to me to-day; in the meantime I should prefer no one else to know it. You have not, of course"—here her eyes gave a glance at him, which Mr. Rolfe afterwards described in Biblical language as having shot through his liver—"breathed a word of it to anybody?"

"Not one syllable," reaturned the lawyer, thankful to think he was telling the truth. It had been on the tip of his tongue after the funeral to reveal

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his present errand to the vicar, as an old friend of the sisters, and one especially interested in their welfare—but his habit of professional caution had fortunately sealed his lips.

"If it would be any convenience to you," he continued, "I can at once supply you with funds. My late client's balance at the banker's (and it was one of his few pleasures to keep a large one) is of course at your disposal, subject—but I really think we may dismiss any idea of the existence of any will from our minds."

It was evident from Martha's face, which suddenly became fierce and white, that she had already dismissed it, and entered in imagination into her kingdom.

"If I find a will, Mr. Rolfe," she broke out passionately, "I shall burn it."

"I hope not—indeed I hope not," he remonstrated fervently. He would have said, "You are joking," but with that white heat of passion glowing in her eyes it was impossible; she had spoken, it was only too clear, in terrible earnest.

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"Let us hope rather that the temptation will not present itself," she answered, with an unpleasant smile; she knew that she had made a mistake, but also that it was irremediable. A weaker nature would have made excuses for itself, but she made none; and, upon the whole, it was better so. The lawyer's eyes were opened, of course, to the great decision of character that belonged to his new client, but he had not been in ignorance of it before. He had the sagacity to perceive that the idea of having the cup of prosperity dashed from her parched lips had been too much for his client's self-control; it is one thing to say we will do this and this, and even to mean it, but quite another to do it; and young women of birth and education, who attend the parish church with regularity, do not commit felony, except in melodrama.

It was very right and proper, and, in the case of so promising a client, extremely natural, that Mr. Rolfe should have taken this charitable view of Martha Vance; but it was probable that in what she said about that not impossible will she would have

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been as good as her word. She had got over the shock of her visitor's good news; it had become a golden reality to her; and the idea of its melting again into dreamland was absolutely intolerable to her. She was like some famished wretch upon the fragment of a raft, who sees the good ship *Rescue* making straight for him, and lo! when she is almost with him, she puts about and sails away, and leaves him cursing God and man. If the bare thought of such a disappointment thus worked with her, how much more would the thing itself! The tiger, till he has tasted human blood, has no desire for it; but Martha had yearned to be rich her whole life long, and now that wealth had seemed within her grasp, she could not bear to listen to the possibility of being poor again.

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CHAPTER VIII.

THE RECEPTION OF A VISITOR.

It is curious how, though the poor man never forgets how he once was prosperous, the prosperous man remembers not the being poor; in this respect poverty is like illness, which while it is with us reminds us of our vanished health, but when health returns the recollection of our having been sick is but that of some nightmare dream. Our "better days" is a subject on which we are never tired of talking; it is the only chance, perhaps, we may ever have of recalling them; but "the day of small things," when we are in prosperity, is soon forgotten.

Miss Martha Vance, of Natchett Hall, was not (as was reported of her) "quite a different person" from Martha Vance of the Cottage, but only in a different stage of her proper existence; she was not

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"the rose in bloom transplanted" (as in the tract), but a rose that had through untoward circumstances —a barren soil and the blight of poverty—been kept from blooming. Now

> "Fold after fold to the fainting air
> Did the soul of her beauty and love lay bare,"

as in the poem; but she held her head high, and it was manifest to those who approached her with familiarity that she had thorns about her. Mrs. Maitland discovered this when she made an early call to ask after Mary, who had been removed to the Hall, and to congratulate Martha upon her change of fortune. She was not so gushing as she intended to be, by reason of the manner of her reception from the first, but she had cause to repent of having gushed at all.

"How glad we all are," she said, "my dear Miss Martha—almost as glad as though it had happened to ourselves! How wonderful are the ways of Providence!"

"Yes."

It was assent, of course, but as an acknowledg-

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ment of so large a proposition the monosyllable seemed inadequate. No doubt, however, Miss Martha's feelings were too deep for words.

"One does not know which to wonder at most," continued the visitor: "the greatness or the suddenness of your good fortune; why, bless me, you haven't had time to get your mourning yet!"

"I have no intention of wearing mourning."

For a moment speech failed Mrs. Maitland, which, in her case, betokened astonishment indeed. That one who had come into a million of money (for so the legend ran) should not wear mourning for the person from whom she inherited it seemed to the good lady a sin against Society itself, and a crime of the first magnitude.

"My *dear* Miss Martha," she gasped, "I do hope you will reconsider that. I am an old woman and you are a young one, and I have known you all my life; you must not be offended if I say that such a course of conduct will be most unbecoming."

"It will be less unbecoming than black crape," observed her hostess quietly.

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"What a subject to joke upon!" thought the old lady, with a shudder; if Miss Martha had been at the Cottage she would have given her a jobation, but, of course, such severe measures would now be out of place; remonstrance, and not reproof, was what was called for.

"After all, my dear, he was your uncle; remember that."

"I am not likely to forget it: 'A little more than kin, and less than kind,' is a line, Mrs. Maitland, you doubtless remember."

Mrs. Maitland did not remember, probably because she had never read it. It struck her that Miss Martha might be quoting from the Bible, in which case the sentiment could not be controverted: it sounded like a text, though it might only be from the Apocrypha.

"That is true, of course, Miss Martha; but when a person is dead one should forgive and forget, or, at all events, try to look as if one did; it's only decent. Mr. Adderly was not a nice person, of course, but we hope he has gone to the good place."

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"I do hope so, and for this reason, Mrs. Maitland, that if he has gone there we shall all go there. There cannot be a bad place if he is not in it."

"Oh dear! oh dear! to speak so of one who has passed into the silent land!"

"That would seem a bad place indeed to some people," rejoined Miss Martha grimly. "But to tell you the honest truth, I care very little what has become of Mr. Adderly. Let us talk, if you please, if not of something more agreeable, at least of something of more importance. You saw Mary on her way here, she tells me; how did you think she was looking?"

"Oh, beautiful!" exclaimed Mrs. Maitland; "it was a sight for sore eyes (though *she* seemed to think nothing of it) to see her sitting like a princess in her own carriage. Of course she looked delicate, being propped up with cushions and things, but I make no doubt she'll soon come round. I am sure *I* should, if I was ever so ill, coming to live at a house like this, after the one she has been accustomed to."

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It was not a graceful remark, but as it happened it was not unwelcome to Miss Martha.

"Well, you would hardly believe it, Mrs. Maitland, but Mary wanted to remain at the Cottage till she was convalescent, though Dr. Gray pointed out to her how much larger and more convenient for a sick person the rooms were here, and that, having an easy carriage at her disposal, there would be no risk in changing quarters."

"Lor', now, you don't say so!" Scraps of information upon such points—the very crumbs from the rich woman's table—were dear to the heart of Mrs. Maitland, just as the Londoner of the same class preserves the cherry-stones dropped from the lips of royalty. "Why, what on earth could have induced her to do that?"

The question, though she had brought it upon herself, was embarrassing to Martha, for she had no doubt in her own mind that the chief reason why Mary had preferred her old home was that it was nearer to the inhabitants of The Crag, and especially to one of them, than the new one.

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"Oh, it was the attraction of old association, no doubt," said Martha carelessly; "you know how sentimental poor dear Mary is. The very spiders that dropped from the straw roof of the Cottage were sacred in her eyes; and as for the half-dozen flowers in that slip of a garden, they might have been her own children for the distress she showed at leaving them."

"And perhaps there was another flower, or one in the flower of his youth, at all events, whom she was more loath to leave than all," said Mrs. Maitland cunningly. "She has not gone so far away from Mr. George, however, but that he'll be coming to see her twice a day more often than once, I'll warrant."

"At present, however, my sister is forbidden to see anybody," remarked Martha dryly.

"Well, let us hope that will not last long," returned the visitor cheerily. She was one of those people who cannot understand that they are treading on another's toes till he knocks them down for it. "Nothing, my dear Miss Martha, will do her so much

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good, we may be sure, as the sight of her lover. I remember when I was just engaged to my own dear William I had the mumps, and what I suffered through his not venturing to come and see me!"

"Under the circumstances," observed Miss Martha, "that was hardly to be wondered at." It was evident she was painting to herself Mrs. Maitland with the mumps, and thought the picture very unattractive.

"He was afraid of catching them, that was it," explained the poor lady hastily; "for if poor William had a fault, it was vanity. Now, we all know—though, to be sure, that is neither here nor there, since dear Miss Mary has not got the mumps: I wish she *had,* instead of what she *has* got—that Mr. Waldron is not one of that sort. A man who thinks less of himself, every way, considering what he has done, does not breathe, or who thinks more of other people. It was always said that if anything could have kept him from falling in love with Mary, it would have been the thought that it was taking his money away from his own family, who want it

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enough, Heaven knows; but, as it turned out, there will be enough and to spare for both, which is a great comfort to us all."

"It is plain, Mrs. Maitland," said Miss Martha, rising from her chair, and speaking with great distinctness, "that the secret of getting on in life—except in years—has not yet been revealed to you. The golden rule is, 'Mind your own business;' and, so far as the affairs of me and mine are concerned, I beg you will, for the future, lay it to heart."

"Why, dear me, Miss Martha, do you want to quarrel with us all?" said the old lady, rising, too, in much agitation.

She had no suspicion of having given cause for offence. No one in Natchett, including Martha herself, had ever found fault before with her gossiping ways, which her simplicity, indeed, robbed of their impertinence. She was honestly shocked at the change which a few days of prosperity had made in her companion's manner, and it was no longer possible for her to ignore it.

In speaking of George Waldron as she had done,

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she had touched on a very tender place indeed, and Martha had been unable to control her temper; but, on the whole, she was not sorry to break with Mrs. Maitland, and (as she knew would follow,) with Natchett society generally. If the Hall had been fifty miles, instead of three, away from the spot where she had lived all her life, she would have been better pleased. She had particular reasons for that sentiment, but poverty had made her hard, and wealth was making her harder. She could not understand that the tears stood in the poor old gossip's eyes, and her limbs trembled from sheer distress of mind, upon *her* account; that a woman with so little refinement or sense of delicacy could still be shocked by a baseness.

"I don't want to quarrel with any of you, Mrs. Maitland," she answered coldly.

"No; you don't want to quarrel, but you don't want to have anything more to do with us, because we are poor people," said the old lady, turning round, with her hand upon the door. "You may be sure I shall not shame you by coming into your

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fine house again. I know that it is not so with Miss Mary, God bless her! but as for you, Miss Martha, you take, I fear, after your uncle Adderly, and, now you have stepped into his shoes, will walk as he did."

If Mrs. Maitland had had the whole literature of philippics at her fingers' ends, she could not have culled from it a statement more scathing to the object of her denunciation; and if she had but known how it had routed her enemy she would have entered the Natchett fly, that was awaiting her at the front door, with some sense of triumph. But as it was, the poor old lady felt anything but triumphant. The Hall, where she had looked forward to a series of brilliant entertainments, was to be henceforth, it seemed, as unknown a paradise to her as ever; she looked towards the windows of the room which she had been told was now Miss Mary's, and shook her head.

"You won't like the change that your good fortune has brought you, my poor dear," she sighed, "if it brings forth fruit like this. The best I can

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wish you is to leave Natchett Hall for your husband's house, wherever it is, as quick as may be. It will not please your gentle heart to stay here and see your sister's goings on, I know."

CHAPTER IX.

TEN POUNDS REWARD.

It was not only Mrs. Maitland who already began to think that Martha Vance was something more than kin to her late uncle; that very afternoon the very same idea—that "she was a chip of the old block, and a very dry one"—occurred to Mr. Rolfe also. This resulted from a conversation he felt it his duty to hold with her respecting the bringing to justice the "person or persons" against whom the coroner's jury that "sat" on Mr. Adderly had brought in a verdict of "Wilful murder."

"I venture to think, Miss Martha," the lawyer remarked respectfully, "that you ought to move in this matter."

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"I? Why?" she answered, with quick surprise. "What have *I* to do with the county constabulary?"

"Well, nothing, of course, my dear madam. Still, in a case of this kind, where not only a most shocking crime has been committed, but upon a person of the highest importance, an unusual effort is expected. The police, like everybody else, are quickened in their action by the hope of what they will get for it."

"That is very wrong," said Martha calmly. "They are paid for doing their duty, I suppose, like other people. Each one has his salary, I conclude. Why give more?"

"'Pon my life," thought Mr. Rolfe to himself, "she is quoting from the tea advertisements. I never had such a client, not in the shape of a lady. She's as great a skinflint as her uncle."

"I don't urge it so much as an act of duty," he said, "which is a matter for your own feelings, but rather as one of expediency. That you should offer a reward for the apprehension of the murderer of Mr. Adderly is what the county will expect."

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"The county constabulary?"

"No, madam, I am speaking of society at large; they are shocked that such an outrage should have been committed in their midst, and apparently with impunity."

"Then why don't they subscribe amongst themselves?" inquired Martha sweetly.

"Well, you see *they* are not Mr. Adderly's relatives."

"Just so; then why do they interfere in the matter. Let them attend to their own affairs."

"Moreover," continued the lawyer, "if you will pardon me for using such an argument, they have not been benefited by Mr. Adderly's decease as you have been."

"Still, he was not murdered to please me," said Miss Martha doggedly; "and nobody, I believe, accuses me of having done it myself."

"Dear me, of course not!" replied Mr. Rolfe (thinking to himself, nevertheless, "She is the very woman to have done it if she had had the chance"). "But one can't swim against the tide in social life.

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Mr. Adderly, you know, tried it himself in another way, and failed. However favourable are the circumstances in which one is placed, it does not do to set one's self against public opinion. Your feelings, for example, with regard to the deceased may still be embittered——"

"I hate him, dead or alive," put in the lady parenthetically.

"Just so, but the county does not understand that. The county only knows that you are his niece, and have inherited from him a large fortune. It is waiting—and I must say not unnaturally waiting—for you to show your consciousness of these things by doing your best to bring his murderer to justice. Of course, I have no object in urging this, save your interest. It is not pleasant to me to advise a client—and especially a lady client—to do what she is unwilling to do; but it is my duty."

"Quite right, Mr. Rolfe; I don't blame you in the least," replied Martha gently. "Perhaps it is as well that I should put myself right with my neighbours, who, as you say, know nothing about my rela-

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tions with my uncle. Since you think such is the proper course, I will offer a reward."

"Come, that is well indeed; I am really pleased," said Mr. Rolfe, rubbing his hands together. "I knew you would take a sensible view, and one that would meet the case."

"That will be my endeavour, my dear sir. I will write to Ralston at Halsworth; perhaps you will kindly drop the letter as you go home, and save a post."

"Write to Ralston? Do you mean the bill-sticker?" inquired the lawyer in astonishment.

"Yes; why not? He advertises in the *Courier* that he undertakes such matters on very reasonable terms."

"But why trouble yourself about these details, my dear madam?"

"Again I say, 'Why not?' Perhaps, like my late uncle, I see no reason for employing a middleman when I can do it cheaper myself, or perhaps the grief I feel for his lamented loss finds some satisfaction in action. I'll write out the bill at once."

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She sat down at her desk, and, selecting a large sheet of letter paper, inscribed upon it, in characters so large that her companion could not help reading it from where he stood, "£10 *Reward.*"

"Whereas some person or persons," she was going on with flowing pen, when the lawyer interrupted her.

"I hope that is your joke, Miss Martha; I cannot imagine that you are seriously going to offer such a sum as that for the apprehension of your uncle's murderer."

"You think it too little, do you?" she answered quietly. "And yet I do assure you I made it double the sum I had thought necessary, expressly to meet your views. The good folks in Natchett, I hear, do me the compliment of taking a great interest in my affairs, and you tell me that the county is equally concerned with them. It is only right, therefore, that the county should know the relations that existed between the late Mr. Adderly and myself, and my own estimate of the domestic calamity that has befallen me. In my opinion, indeed, £5 reward would

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have been ample, but out of deference to your wishes I make it £10. As to the number of copies of the bill, I leave that to your judgment, since so many more people seem to take an interest in the matter than I had any idea of."

"Of course I cannot prevent your sending that order, Miss Martha," said the lawyer gravely; "but I decline to take it. I will have no hand in what I consider to be nothing less than a defiance of public opinion. I am sure if poor Miss Mary——"

"Poor Miss Mary has nothing to do with it. I have signed my own name to the bill, and take the whole responsibility of it. Since you won't take it, it will go by post. That will cost me a penny, which would have made your late client exceedingly angry; but you have now, I flatter myself, a very different person to deal with."

This was not, as we have said, Mr. Rolfe's opinion when he parted that day with Miss Martha. He thought his two clients very much alike indeed. But in calling her a skinflint he made a mistake. It was not from economy that she had proposed to

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herself such a very moderate reward; but from sheer hatred of the person on whose behalf it was to be spent; and she was actually grateful to Mr. Rolfe for having thus (though quite contrary to his intention) suggested a method by which she could show her contempt for her uncle's memory.

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CHAPTER X.

COUNSEL'S OPINION.

MISS MARTHA VANCE'S behaviour as coheiress of Squire Adderly was anything but pleasing to a good many people. Even those who were prepared to make the most allowance for her pronounced it very unbecoming. Her refusal to wear mourning was bad enough, but her offer of that ten-pound reward was nothing less than what Mr. Rolfe had foreseen—a defiance of public opinion, and a slap in the dainty face of Society itself. It was mean, it was indecent, it was infamous, and a number of other uncomplimentary adjectives. The few who ventured to argue with her upon the subject fared worse than even the lawyer had done, because they had less right to interfere; and the safety-valve of remonstrance being thus denied them, they exploded in some very strong language among themselves. As

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in the case of the misconduct of a lady of even higher rank, they used some bitter words which were not meet for Miss Martha to hear (though somehow she did so), and among them the observation that a beggar on horseback, whether male or female, was always an offensive spectacle.

But all this was nothing compared with the annoyance and distress that was produced by Miss Martha's conduct among the family at The Crag. After that last interview with her, in which he had almost directly charged her with being the cause of her sister's relapse, George Waldron found his position a very difficult one. His constant inquiries at the Cottage, while the invalid still remained there, were answered only by the little maid, who, in tones however sympathetic, could only tell him what she had been told to say, that Miss Mary was too ill to see him.

Mrs. Waldron and Maggie had indeed been admitted within doors, but never into the sick-room. Martha had met them with apparent friendliness, but with a stereotyped expression of regret that at

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present Mary was too weak to receive visitors, however dear to her. She was, above all things, to avoid excitement, of which, as they would understand, she had had far too much of late. The statement, being backed by "the doctor's order," could not be gainsaid. Still, an uncomfortable feeling was produced in the two ladies, besides that which arose from the ill news.

When on the first occasion they returned home, much disappointed, and communicated what had happened to Hetty, she said:

"I am not surprised. It is Martha's first move in the new game."

"What *do* you mean, Hetty?" cried Maggie with a quick flush.

"Really, my dear," said Mrs. Waldron, "I wish you would not so often say things without thinking."

"On the other hand, my dear mother," answered Hetty, with a gravity very unusual to her, "I often think things without saying them. Living here so much alone, I endeavour to make up for my absence from the world by speculating on what my fellow-

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creatures are like, from the very little I see of them; just as Professor Owen makes up a beast or a bird complete when you show him but a hair or a feather. At present it is a beast I have in my eye, and its name is Martha Vance."

"I can only say, Hetty, that you shock me," observed her mother.

"I am always sorry to shock *you*, dear mother (though I confess that I rather like giving some people the jumps); but what we have to consider is whether I am telling the truth, without reference to its being of a disagreeable character. I do not pretend to be wiser than my neighbours, but though it may seem to place me at a disadvantage, my unfortunate condition in reality gives me opportunities for judgment of other people. I excite neither envy nor jealousy, and am thought no more of by many persons than if I were a stock or a stone. This makes them in my presence very frank and incautious. On the other hand, those who love me, out of the pity of their hearts, are very confidential with me about their own affairs. I am not, of course, at

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liberty to repeat what has been said to me about Martha Vance; but what struck you as peculiar in her is easily explained, and to me not at all unexpected. She wishes to break off dear Mary's engagement."

"I hardly like to say so," exclaimed Maggie; "but, upon my word, mother, there was something in Martha's manner to-day that did suggest that idea to me, though, of course, I put it aside."

"Well, you'll have to take it up again," said Hetty.

"I cannot believe it," protested Mrs. Waldron; "we are not justified in imputing any such motive to Martha."

"Perhaps not, but *I* am," observed the invalid quietly. "The thing is not worth debate, since the fact will become clearer and clearer every day, or I could give you plenty of reasons."

"Do you mean to say that she will not let us see Mary?" exclaimed Mrs. Waldron in horrified tones.

"Not if she can help it. Sooner or later, of course,

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you must see her, but her object is to separate her from you as much as possible, and especially from dear George."

It was curious how the relative positions of mother and daughter seemed for the moment reversed; the former, with all the experience of years, sitting at the latter's feet, and learning the lesson that the simplicity and straightforwardness of her own nature would never have taught her; but she was loath to learn it.

"Hetty dear, I hope and trust you are wrong; and if it be so, how can you ever atone for thinking such hard things of poor Martha?"

"I will gladly compound for that, mother," answered Hetty bitterly. "What is 'poor Martha' to me compared with George? What a brother he has been to me and Maggie!—what a son to you!—what a guardian-angel of our little home! To think that it is possible for a woman such as she is to wreck the life of a man like him!"

"But how can she do it?" exclaimed Maggie. "Mary is not a child."

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"I don't say she can; I only say she will if she can. She can use reasons with Mary—never mind what reasons—but such as have never entered your mind, and the motive of which will never enter Mary's."

"But, Hetty, you once told me that you thought Martha had a liking for George."

"If so, it is a liking that has changed to dislike. George has felt it himself without the least suspicion of the cause."

"But the cause, if it exists, will be plain to everybody," urged Maggie. "That the acquisition of wealth should make an old friend false, dishonest, treacherous—no, Hetty, I will not believe it of Martha unless I am compelled to do so. The world is not so black as you paint it."

Hetty shook her little head and smiled.

"How I envy you, my dear, 'your early heaven, your happy views'!—you have health and a lover."

"You say, Hetty, that George has seen some change in Martha's conduct," observed Mrs. Waldron, who had been engaged in silent thought for the

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last few minutes. "Has he any idea that she is doing what you suspect she is doing?"

"Oh no, no; thank Heaven, no!" answered Hetty earnestly. "He is not one to think such evil of any woman; and if he did, he would still feel sure of Mary."

"And why should *we* not feel sure of her?"

"Mother dear, do not press that question. I have said enough of Martha already, out (as it may well strike you) of an uncharitable heart. As to Mary, we know Mary is as true as steel. But we do not know what forces may have been brought to bear against her."

"Forces?"

"I don't mean violence, mother," said Hetty, smiling feebly; "I mean we don't know what arguments, which her illness makes her unable to combat, may have been employed. It is of no use supposing these terrible things, but Mary may not be herself. With me it is different, because I am always ill and crotchety; but others, when they are ill and well, are different persons, and Mary may be very ill."

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"That is certainly the impression Martha left upon our minds," observed Mrs. Waldron gloomily.

"She would endeavour to do that at all events, but it is plain from Mary's not communicating with us that she has some serious ailment; unless, indeed, her silence is compulsory."

"Oh, Hetty!"

"You are right, mother; I withdraw that word. Little Susan is too honest to be a party to anything of the kind."

"And there is dear Dr. Gray."

"Yes, to be sure," said Hetty, with a smile, provoked, as it seemed, by a reminiscence, "there is dear Dr. Gray; but, clever as he is in his profession, he is no match for Martha. Even an artless creature like myself has got him now and then to say things he did not quite mean. If you are denied access to Mary again, perhaps the best thing to be done is to call him in to me. If I don't get the whole truth out of him before he comes to his 'just half a sheet of note-paper, my dear, and I will write you out a prescription,' my name is not Hetty Waldron."

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The imitation of the doctor's voice as he said his usual farewell words was perfect; the prospect of action—with a spice of mischief in it—had restored the speaker to her wonted gaiety. But the other two women were sad. All had hitherto been going so well with the common object of their love that any hindrance to his happiness was a shock to them. They had flattered themselves that George was about to be rewarded, almost as much as he deserved, for his life of unselfishness and self-denial, within a few months at farthest, and it was dreadful to believe that one whose duty it was to further his wishes should have set herself in opposition to them; and they really did believe it. Hetty was the genius of the family, and "always right." As she had said, indeed, sooner or later they would see dear Mary, when everything would, of course, come right, so far as she and George were concerned; but it was very sad that Mary's sister should have so behaved to them; it made a rift in their relations with her, which had been very friendly (though Mary had always been their favourite), and which they had

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hoped would have become more so through intermarriage. Mrs. Waldron's pride was touched that Martha's sudden accession to wealth should have altered her views. If George had been a poor man, it is even possible that the widow would have disapproved of his pursuing his claim under such altered circumstances; but there was really no such disproportion of fortune between them as could justify objection, setting aside the fact that when their engagement had been made the inequality had been all on the other side. It was very shameful conduct on Martha's part, and Mrs. Waldron was greatly distressed at it.

Maggie, on the other hand, was less pained than indignant. The idea of George not being good enough for any girl, even if she possessed millions, was monstrous; and what, to do her justice, angered her even more was that, as she felt certain, dear innocent Mary had, in some way or other, been made to play into her sister's hands. She must be ill indeed if she was not only unable to see such old friends as Maggie and her mother, but to write even a pencilled line to George.

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It had been arranged that the conference between Mrs. Waldron and her daughters was to be kept secret; but John Dennet and Maggie were to be one some day, and as far as was possible and becoming, the poor girl endeavoured in every way to anticipate that happy hour—and, among others, by telling him everything. She therefore laid the case of Martha *versus* George before him for counsel's opinion, which was delivered as confidentially as it was proposed (in whispers), and with his arm round his client's waist. It was the cause of something as near approaching to a quarrel as was possible between these two devoted young people. For, partly in hopes to prepare Maggie for the worst, lest George's engagement should really be broken off, and partly from that cynical view of life which it is the habit of young barristers to take in all cases where they are not themselves concerned (when they are just as soft as anybody else), he ventured to suggest that Mary herself might be to blame.

"People think so much of money, you see—indeed, I think about it a good deal myself, though only for the sake of what it would bring to us—and

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the difference to some people (as again in our own case) which money makes is so enormous, my dear, that one really should be astonished at no change produced by it in a young woman's behaviour. You and I know, of course, what a capital fellow George is—worth his weight in gold——"

"I should think so," interrupted Maggie; "gold, indeed!"

"Well, let us say diamonds. But suddenly to find one's self worth £50,000, after having had to look twice at every sixpence, is enough to throw most people off the rails."

"Well, for my part, I see no sort of reason for persons becoming base because they have money left them," said Maggie decisively.

"Of course you don't," he answered tenderly. "I only wish somebody would put the temptation in your way, because I know you would withstand it, and not throw me over, my darling, for anybody else."

"As you're not going to be thrown over, you needn't hold me so tight, sir," said Maggie. "I de-

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clare you put me out of patience by trying to find excuses for this wretched girl."

"My dear, she is but human, remember, and not an angel, as you are. And then, perhaps, she may not be so fond of George as George is of her."

"Oh, as to that, I don't think there is much love lost between them," said Maggie.

"Good heavens!—what, after all?"

"Yes. In spite, as you would say, of their coming relationship and of the friendship that has so long existed between the two families, Martha has never taken to George, and of course he is aware of it. Even if George were the most ordinary instead of the most admirable and lovable—well, *one* of the most lovable—of men, it would be inexcusable in Martha to give him the cold shoulder, since I do believe she is really fond of Mary, as, indeed, who could help being fond? A more unselfish, pure-hearted creature never drew breath. Such motives as you were speaking of just now, John, would be absolutely unintelligible to her. Not even her uncle Adderly, incredulous of human goodness

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as he was, imputed them to her. What makes the present condition of affairs so mysterious is that it is positively certain dearest Mary's mind is unchanged in all respects."

"Just so," said the young lawyer, as though he were assenting to the most obvious proposition in the world; but what he was saying to himself, as he nodded his head, was, "By Jingo, but I have had a very narrow escape!"

It is fair to say that at that time he had but a slight knowledge of Mary Vance, and not the least suspicion that her gentle heart had been often stirred to its depths upon his own account, for Maggie had never told him of her friend's sympathy, because it would have wounded dear John's pride.

"Then, what in your opinion is the cause of it all?" inquired Maggie. She was a little disappointed that John's readiness and sagacity, which were unequalled in her eyes, had not at once suggested some course of action; but even a lawyer requires to take breath after a mistake of great magnitude before falling into another.

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"Well, of course Miss Martha is the cause," he answered, with that tender consideration for inferior sagacity always shown by gentlemen of his profession; "who else could it be? As to the motive, it is probable, from what you tell me, that she always disliked the idea of parting with her sister, and was reconciled to it only by the advantages offered by George's alliance. Now those have ceased to exist, she wishes to break off the match. The impression produced upon your mother and yourself by her manner is exactly what she intended. She calculates upon your family pride taking fire and burning the true-love-knot—the tie of engagement."

"But Mary? Why is Mary silent?"

"You may well ask that," thought John to himself; but he answered readily enough, "Mary, I fear, is very ill."

"There I think you're wrong, John, though it's hard to think it, you dear clever creature; of course she is ill, but neither mamma nor I gathered from Martha's tone that she is very seriously so."

"It was cheerful, was it?"

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"Yes, that is just the word; how curious you should hit upon it! Her tone was cheerful."

"Perhaps her grief for Mary's illness was mitigated by thoughts of the future. Do you know what is better than becoming an heiress to £50,000, Maggie?"

"Is it a riddle? Well, just now, John," she answered, smiling, "though a tenth of such a sum would be ample for *our* purposes, I confess that I hardly think I do know."

"Well, I can tell you: it is becoming an heiress to £100,000."

"Oh, John, John, John!" Maggie hid her face in her hands and burst into tears.

"What's the matter, my darling?" he exclaimed, with passionate alarm. "Is it the cramp?"

"No, John; you have shocked me," she sobbed. "That you should have imputed such a wicked thought to any person, least of all to a sister, fills me with horror. You will say next that Mar—Mar—Martha wants to mur—mur—murder Mary."

It took the young fellow all he knew to smooth

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matters. Astute though he was, he had yet to learn that the strong meat of argument that goes down with juries does not suit every palate. Yet it was fated that a time should come when Maggie would say to herself—though even then with a shudder—"What if that dear, clever John of mine should have been right, after all!"

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CHAPTER XI.

DOCTOR AND PATIENT.

It was not for a day or two, during which Mrs. Waldron and Maggie had called again and again at the Cottage, with the same ill success, so far as being admitted to Mary's presence was concerned, as before, that Dr. Gray paid a visit to The Crag, to see his favourite patient. Perhaps the message the widow had sent to him on her daughter's behalf was not a very pressing one, and, indeed, that truthful lady had scruples about sending for him, on what was something very like a false pretence, at all; or, perhaps, there were many calls upon his professional time, when the chronic cases had to wait; or perhaps he had his own reasons for not going to The Crag sooner than he could help just then. At all events, there was some reason for Hetty's greeting to him, when he did come, being

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pitched in a querulous key, very different, however, from that Mrs. Maitland would have used had he been tardy in prescribing for her rheumatism, and more like a sick fairy princess complaining of the neglect of Oberon's own physician.

"It seems I am quite forgotten now, doctor; since you have an heiress to attend to, it is no longer worth your while, I suppose, to look after poor me."

"That's it, my dear," he answered with great gravity; "your intelligence, at least, whatever else is the matter with you, is, I am glad to perceive, as bright as ever."

"If I could believe in anyone else but yourself, doctor, I would never have asked you to see me again," said Hetty viciously.

"If there was anybody else to physic you within twenty miles the compliment would be greater," replied the old fellow, but with a smile that showed he was pleased, nevertheless. "And now let us see what I can do for you."

As they both knew he could do nothing, the

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examination did not take very long; there was very little change to be noted, but such as there was was unfavourable.

"You have been fretting about something," he said, "Miss Hetty."

"How wise you are!" she murmured admiringly; "I sometimes think it is witchcraft; it is impossible to conceal anything from you, doctor."

"Tut, tut! it is only because you are as transparent as you are fragile, my dear child."

"Well, I *have* been worried, doctor, I must confess. We don't understand why neither mamma nor Maggie has been admitted to see Mary."

"Ay, ay, that's it, is it?" He tried to smile, but looked uncomfortable, and drummed his fingers on the table beside him, as was his wont when embarrassed or displeased.

"Yes, that's it, doctor dear. You must remember, if I seem to be putting impertinent questions, that my world is a very, very small one, just mother and sister and brother, and *you*, with two or three more at most; and George is all in all to us,

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and he *was* so happy ten days ago, and now he is *so* miserable. *Why* doesn't Mary see him?"

"She is not well enough, my dear; that is the simple fact," said the doctor earnestly. That he was speaking the truth was evident, but was it the whole truth? Hetty felt sure that there was something behind, because his fingers began to drum on the table again, though very softly.

"But she must be very ill indeed if she cannot see mamma!"

"I did not say *that;* I was speaking of your brother."

"Just so; but mamma has not seen Mary. Perhaps Martha thought even that would be too much for her."

"Well, perhaps so; she is very nervous about her sister."

"And yet she let her go that night to Mr. Adderly, when all the mischief was done."

"Quite true, unfortunately; but that only makes the offender more apprehensive now."

"And yet I hear that she persuaded Mary, who

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is too ill to see mamma, to be moved to-day to the Hall."

"Yes; I am not sure whether that was judicious; but, on the other hand, the rooms are certainly more airy and cheerful."

"Cheerful! the Hall cheerful? That was what Martha said, was it? A woman who would say that would say anything."

"Now, really, my dear——"

"Had Mary no voice in the matter?" Hetty went on excitedly. "Can she not even *speak?*"

"Her voice is very weak and low, I am sorry to say."

"You know very well that is not what I meant," said Hetty softly, putting out her little hand and laying it on the old fellow's wrist, as though physician and patient had changed *rôles;* "it used not to be your custom to fence with me. You must forgive me, doctor, if I at least speak to you frankly and in the old way."

"Surely, surely, my dear child," he answered, "nothing has happened to change either of us?"

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"I hope so, I trust so. I cannot believe that so wise and kind a man, and one, too, as I have good cause to know, himself as far removed from love of wealth as the angels, should be dazzled by it in others; but your views of Martha Vance are not the same. No, doctor, they are not; you may leave me if you please," for, indeed, the doctor had risen, though with professional quiet, with a flush on his face and a frown on his brow. "If it is the last word I say to you, and you never come to smooth my pillow or soothe my pain again, I tell you that you have suffered that woman to take her own way as you would not have done a month ago."

"It is a very serious charge, Miss Hetty," answered the old fellow gravely; "and one that, being as false as it is disgraceful, I would not stay to hear out from any lips but yours."

"I know it; I am trading upon my miserable condition, and upon the kindness you have always shown me. I am risking your regard for me, I am venturing my all, I know, doctor; but it is for George's sake. You cannot understand—how should

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you, being what you are?—that this sudden change from poverty to wealth, which seems so glorious to her, has been Martha's ruin. She would have all things become new, and her friends among them. It is her aim to keep her sister, the heiress, apart from us, who loved her for her own sake, without thinking whether she was rich or poor. If she could poison her mind against us, it is my firm conviction that she would do so; but since that is impossible with a nature so true as Mary's, she is trusting to the chapter of accidents, the force of circumstances, and—to begin with—this separation, to effect her object. She hopes that George will be too proud to press his suit in the face of altered conditions and the cold shoulder. As for you, dear doctor, I know well—but not better than she knows it—that you would as soon think of playing into her hands in such a scheme as of robbing the church poor-box. Doubtless she has used to you arguments of quite another kind; all has been 'for dear Mary's sake:' 'Don't you think, doctor, that, for the present, at least, all excitement should be

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avoided?' 'I know I have your permission, doctor, to impress upon dear Mary the necessity of perfect quiet;' 'Don't you think a change to the Hall, where the rooms are *so* airy and cheerful, would be beneficial, doctor?' You have heard all this before, I'm certain."

"Well, upon my life, I *have* heard something like it," said the doctor, unable to suppress a smile at Hetty's perfect imitation of Miss Martha's voice and manner. "But you must forgive my not sharing your opinion of my patient's sister. *Nemo repente fuit turpissimus* is a prescription of universal application. Even a homœpathic practitioner is not qualified for practice in three weeks; I *can't* believe that Miss Martha has so deteriorated in the same space of time. However, such a charge as this is like one made in an anonymous letter, which, though one refuses to believe, still keeps one's eyes open as regards the person implicated."

"That is all I wanted, my dear doctor," cried Hetty delightedly. 'From information received,' as the police say, you will now be able to draw your

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own conclusions; and now, when can mother and Maggie go to see Mary?"

"Any day; to-morrow, if they please, unless they hear from me to the contrary."

"That is admirable; but George? When may George see her?"

"Your brother's case is different. Yes," said the doctor with emphasis. "It is only just to Miss Martha to say that, as regards George, she is *not* to blame for keeping him at a distance. Whether she had the motives you impute to her or not, his name was never mentioned between us. I may have been mistaken, but I acted for the best, and to Mary herself I discouraged his coming."

The doctor's tone was earnest, but, at the same time, expressed a certain confusion; and, finding himself in the neighbourhood of the table, his fingers indulged in a gentle tattoo.

"And how long is this veto to last?" inquired Hetty plaintively. "If you knew how my poor brother feels it, you would shorten his term of banishment, I know."

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"Their engagement is very recent; they have only known one another a few weeks, save in childhood," returned the other, like one who advances arguments he has rehearsed before; "he cannot surely take the matter so deeply to heart."

"My dear doctor," returned Hetty gravely, "you do not know George, though what you know of him I am convinced you like. His love, like all else belonging to him, has an intense earnestness; if ever love could be called true love, I am persuadod that it is so in his case. He does not talk of it much, any more than he talks of his creed, but for the same reason, because it is too sacred. This may be incredible to you, but, wise as you are, if you doubt it you are wrong. Even I"—and she pointed to herself with a pathetic gesture—"know better than that. George and Mary are wrapped up in one another; every moment they are apart seems to him a lost moment; even to see her, though he were forbidden to speak with her, would be paradise to him compared with what he now suffers."

"Since it is so, he shall see her as soon as ever

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she is strong enough, I promise you," said the doctor.

"But will she ever be strong enough?" flashed Hetty, like a rapier from its sheath, before the opponent can show his weapon and put himself on his guard.

"Medicine is not an exact science," stammered the old fellow. "We cannot say 'yes' or 'no' for certain."

"Nevertheless you have said 'No,'" said Hetty, with a calmness that was almost cynical. "I had hoped, doctor, that you knew me well enough to trust me with a secret of this kind; so Mary and I will be together before our dear ones come to us. My poor, poor George!"

Her tears, which touched the good doctor's heart, also aroused his professional indignation, and gave him courage. He felt it was not too late to remedy his indiscretion.

"I am ashamed of you, Hetty; how can you excite yourself in this way, when I have so repeatedly warned you against it? You are a pretty one in-

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deed to be told secrets of the sick-room! Nor are you fit to guess at them, since your guessing leads you so far astray. To convince you of the folly of your fears, your brother shall see Mary this very week, perhaps to-morrow. There, does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, doctor," she answered gratefully. "It will be an immense comfort to him and to all of us."

"And you will confess to me that you thought things worse than they really are."

"I will; and also that I have been very impertinent, doctor dear, but that is *your* fault, who have always spoilt me."

"Well, well, there may be something in that, I admit, my dear; now you have got all you want out of me—an immediate order for seeing the patient to your mother and sister, an order almost as soon for George—and have sown a very unpleasant suspicion in my mind respecting my best lady client, perhaps you will be graciously pleased to let me go."

Hetty extended to him her finger-tips, which he

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carried to his lips, in the gallant old-fashioned style which he always used with her.

As soon as the door was closed behind him, however, his countenance fell. "I don't know, after all, whether it would not have been as well to tell her the truth," he sighed. "The insinuating little baggage almost got it out of me, as it was. But since she has missed it, let it be so. She has troubles enough of her own, without anticipating those of others. Man is born to them, we are told, as the sparks fly upward; but the observation might have been still more justly applied to woman."

As for Hetty, the smile with which she had dismissed her late visitor faded at once into a look of blank despair. She wept no more, not because her thoughts were too deep for tears, but too audacious. There were times when the spirit within her fragile frame resented the decrees of Fate in a manner others little suspected, and this was one of them. "There must indeed be a hereafter," she murmured, "if it be but to compensate the Generous and the Good for what they unjustly suffer in this world."

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An overweening and presumptuous speech, perhaps, but certainly not a selfish one; it was seldom that she questioned her own lot, and when she did so it was in quite another fashion. With her eyes closed, but her ears listening to every sound, she lay still and silent as a sculptured crusader till Maggie entered the room alone.

"Mrs. Maitland has fastened upon poor mother," she cried, "and will hold her with her glittering eye for the next five minutes. Now, what does the doctor say of Mary?"

"He has said little, yet more than he meant, Maggie."

"Good heavens! Is it bad news?"

"It *is* bad news. If I tell it you, Maggie—as I mean to do—it is because you are sensible, and have someone who will help you to bear it. You must not tell mother, and George least of all. It is not quite certain," added Hetty quickly, in pity for her companion, into whose wholesome face there had come a deadly paleness, "as the doctor himself said, and I only prepare you for the worst, that

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when the time comes—if it must come—we may make it easier for poor George."

"Easier!" murmured Maggie. "If you mean Mary is to die, that will kill him."

"Oh no, no; Fate is not so much in love with goodness as that," answered Hetty bitterly.

"Or so cruel to us," put in the other reprovingly.

"That is well said, Maggie. 'Be near me when my light is low,' for Heaven knows I need you. Moreover, as I have said, the doctor is not sure about it."

"She was really too ill, then, to see us, and we have wronged poor Martha?"

"No, I do not say that. I think just as badly of her as I did before, and as, I believe, the doctor thinks. As I suspected, up till now she has hoodwinked him, and, under pretence of anxiety upon Mary's account, kept you away from her. But George's case is different. The doctor, though he means so well, does not understand matters that you and John and even I know. Thinking Mary

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very ill, he thought it a cruel kindness to both her and George to encourage a love that could never bear fruit—that their separation would soon lead to their forgetting one another. Something of this kind, I am sure, assisted, doubtless, by Martha's behaviour, but not suggested by it, was at the bottom of his veto. Now all that is gone away. Mother and you are to see Mary to-morrow, and George as soon as may be. But you must not think it too good news. There is trouble coming upon our dear brother. We must meet it, for his sake, as best we may. Hush! don't cry; there is mother! Run upstairs, and I will see her alone."

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CHAPTER XII.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

ART is good, but there is nowadays a great deal too much fuss made about it, and at the best it is a poor thing compared with Nature. A landscape has nobler charms than any brush can depict on canvas. A simple maiden in her flower (if only her flower would not overblow!) is worth all the statues at large, and so it is down to mere behaviour; all the smirks and bows of a Chesterfield are as naught compared with a natural manner, which, like common-sense, notwithstanding its name, is exceedingly rare; in women, indeed, it has almost become extinct. Hetty Waldron was one of the few exceptions. No doubt her calamity (as happens much more often than is supposed) was an advantage to her. She could say what she pleased—even the truth—and it was forgiven her. Nobody could

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accuse a crippled girl, doomed probably to an early death, of "forwardness" or "flirtation," and what she said in her small world had weight. Even among busybodies, whom she did not spare, she was not unpopular; the arrows of her scorn did not penetrate them; even if they felt a prick, they did not resent it. Mrs. Maitland, for example, said "Miss Hetty had a certain agreeable insolence"—the most intelligent observation, probably, that that good lady had ever made.

But by her own people Hetty Waldron was adored. Her wit, her high spirits (so amazing in her circumstances), her hatred of injustice and of falsehood, her gratitude for all that was done for her, her sympathy with the trials of others, notwithstanding they were so removed from her own, her interest in the world to which she did not belong, the large-heartedness of that feeble frame, were thoroughly appreciated in her domestic circle, and beyond it. Dr. Gray was devoted to her. As a patient, she was the most interesting one he had ever had; and in diagnosing her symptoms, he

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flattered himself he was dissecting her mind, whereas she had dissected *his* mind.

She was not one of those women who are blind to the foibles of those they love: she saw them clearly and loved their possessors none the less. With marvellous dexterity she had contrived to put the doctor on his guard against Martha Vance without wounding his *amour-propre.* Nor was he aware that she had fathomed his apprehensions respecting Mary. He knew that he had imprudently made her uneasy upon that point, but imagined that he had afterwards done away with the impression. What *she* had said, on the other hand, impressed him very much. Though she had been careful to exonerate him from any such charge, he was conscious that Martha's sudden accession to wealth had had an undue influence upon him. His profession—though the noblest of all callings—is peculiarly susceptible to the claims of "position"; and in the country this is still more marked. Miss Vance, of Natchett Hall, was not the same person, in his estimation, as Miss Martha of the Cottage had been,

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Her views had had more weight with him, her wishes had found a readier response; and no suspicion of a motive other than those she put forward had entered into his mind. But now that Hetty had opened his eyes he was angry with himself for having been cajoled, and still more angry with his cajoler. To do the doctor justice, there was nothing of the "snob" in his composition. His respect for the high-placed and prosperous was conventional; his contempt for falsehood and for meanness was the gift of nature.

It was fortunate, perhaps, for all parties that he had already paid his daily visit to the Hall. If he had gone thither fresh from his talk with Hetty, he might have given Miss Martha some advice (about making a catspaw of an honest man) which lay outside the lines of his profession. But now that he had time to think about it, he felt that for the sake of others he must, for the present at all events, forego the satisfaction of giving that lady a piece of his mind. The necessity of this course of conduct distressed him not a little, and so occupied his

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thoughts that in visiting his lady patients that afternoon he broke forth into ejaculations such as, "What a precious humbug!" "False to her backbone!" and "Vixen!" which seemed to them uncalled for, or at least exaggerated.

When the doctor called at the Hall the next morning, he was received, as usual, by Miss Martha.

"I must ask you to postpone your visit to your patient for a few minutes," she said, "as Mr. Harden is with her."

The vicar, as we know, was a great favourite with the doctor, but this observation was unwelcome to him; that he—her medical attendant—should be asked to wait while some other person interviewed his patient appeared to him an impertinence, and one his hostess would not have ventured upon a few weeks ago. It was true enough, then, it seemed, that her head had been turned by the revolution of Fortune's wheel; but he would let her know that plain John Gray was the same man he had always been, whether to squire or fisherman.

"Mr. Harden?" he repeated. "How comes it,

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Miss Martha, that you have allowed him to see your sister, when those nearer and dearer of her own sex have been so rigorously excluded?"

There was that in his eye, as well as in his tone, which told his hostess that the contest she had foreseen must come sooner or later had begun.

"You have been talking to your friends at The Crag, I perceive," she said, with a contemptuous smile.

"Why not?" he replied; "they are my friends still. Nobody has left *me* a fortune, that I should wish to cut the connection with them."

The doctor had mounted his mare that morning with the fixed intention of keeping his temper with this lady, but that insolent remark of hers, coming atop of this professional slight, had been too much for him.

"That is a deliberate insult, Dr. Gray," she said.

"I suppose it seems so," he answered coldly. "There are times when the simple truth must needs wear that complexion."

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She knew that her companion's eyes were opened, and that to contradict him would have been waste of breath. Furiously as the flame of passion burnt within her, her long habit of self-restraint stood her in good stead. Every moment of silence —and with a great effort she kept silence—was a gain to her; it was an occasion when second thoughts indeed were best. She had striven to make this man her friend as well as her accomplice, and to lose him would be a loss indeed. It was not only that his good opinion was of the utmost consequence to her, but that his help was needed to carry out her schemes. Her nature was bold even to audacity, but she dreaded the enmity of this honest old fellow, who was so respected and had the ear of all.

"I am sorry," she said humbly, "that you should think I wish to break with old friends, Dr. Gray, and for so mean a motive. I will not say that your mind has been poisoned against me since I saw you last, but it has certainly been prejudiced. Up till now I was under the impression that you thought

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with me that dear Mary should not be excited by visitors."

This allusion to his having involuntarily lent himself to his companion's designs was wormwood.

"And that is why the first time Mr. Harden calls you allow him, without consulting me, to see your sister."

"But Mr. Harden is a clergyman."

And here Miss Martha made her second mistake, and a much more serious one.

"A clergyman! You consider your sister, then, already at the point of death, and are making arrangements against the worst. It is possible, madam, to have too much of forethought;" and with those terrible words he cast a look at her which was an accusation.

"Dr. Gray, you do me wrong," she said, drawing herself up with dignity. "May Heaven strike me dead this moment if I have ever, for one single instant, had that contingency in my mind of which you speak. In yonder chamber lies the only being I love, and better than myself, as should be, for she

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is far more worthy. Whatever I have done in this matter has been for her good."

"For her good, but in your own way," observed the doctor coldly. "If I am to continue my visits here, that way must be altered. Mrs. Waldron and Maggie are both coming to the Hall to-day by my permission to see Mary."

"I have no objection, I am sure, if you think it will not be injurious to her."

"And George——"

"You said yourself," she broke in passionately, "that it would be a cruelty to let George Waldron see her. You are acting with disloyalty to your patient in permitting him to have thus persuaded you."

"I have not even seen Mr. Waldron."

"Then it's Hetty," she answered in a flash. "Hetty, who poses as the chronic invalid, and can turn you round her little finger. She paints her brother, no doubt, as of delicate texture as herself: a man whom some people call a hero, broken-hearted at his separation from a girl he has only

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known a month. You ought to know your own sex better than that."

"You are mistaken. In permitting Mary to see this young man, I am thinking of her only; just as when I advised they should be kept apart, I had her interests solely at heart."

"Then what has caused you to change your opinion?"

"Another view of the case, and I think a more correct one. I will not endure," he added angrily, "to be questioned upon such a matter, madam."

"That is to say you shrink from cross-examination. I do not wonder at that. Until yesterday you were one with me as to the treatment that should be pursued with respect to my dear sister. She was not to be excited, you said, by any interview with Mr. Waldron. You accuse me, as I gather, of a wish to isolate her from her friends; yet, on the first occasion when Mr. Harden expresses a desire to see her, I instantly accede to it."

"It was an injudicious exception, madam, though

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I have no doubt—as I have already said—that you had your reasons for it."

"And my reasons, sir, whatever they are, still hold good, though yours have vanished, dissolved by Miss Hetty's smiles. With my goodwill, Mr. Waldron shall never set foot in Natchett Hall."

"Madam, I must speak plainly. You only intend your sister, it seems, to see the clergyman—and the undertaker."

She rose from her chair, and, speechless with passion, motioned her companion to leave the room.

"If I go, Miss Martha, remember this, that I do not come back again," he said, confronting her with a glance as resolute as her own. "I will have no hand in your schemes. I warn you, too, that the confidence which I have hitherto preserved no longer exists between us. I shall say what I think, and it seems you do not like my thoughts."

"Why do you not express your suspicions at once, though Heaven is my witness they are as false as they are cruel."

"I have said nothing about suspicions. But I

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cannot prevent, nor shall I attempt to prevent, other people entertaining them. And let me tell you, Miss Martha, you are standing on dangerous ground."

"I am afraid neither of your lies nor of those of other people, Dr. Gray; I am mistress here——"

"Not sole mistress yet," put in the other sternly. "I do not say you are hastening matters, but you are certainly anticipating them."

Her pale cheek grew livid, but she went on as if he had not spoken:

"And while I am so George Waldron shall never cross this threshold."

It was on the doctor's lips to reply, "Then neither will I." Even the thought of his patient—always hitherto the first with him—would not, perhaps, have restrained him, when suddenly the door opened and Æneas Harden stood before them. His face was white and drawn, his eyes had a far-away look in them, but as they rested on Dr. Gray they seemed to gather consciousness and comfort.

"I am glad you are here, doctor; pray go in at

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once and see your patient. I am taking a message for her to Natchett, and have no time to lose."

"A message?" cried Martha; "what message?"

"She wishes to see George Waldron. I promised her that he should be here in an hour."

Before Martha could speak a word he had left the room, like one who has nothing more to say, and his hurrying footsteps echoed through the hall without. There was that in his face that warned her she could no more have stopped him than have stayed fire or flood.

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CHAPTER XIII.

GEORGE AND MARY.

THOUGH not another word was said, the victory was complete. Miss Martha's fortress of obstinacy had been carried by the suddenness of the vicar's onslaught, and perhaps at heart she was not sorry that it had succumbed. It would have been next door to ruin to have withstood the doctor, and in all the storm of passion that had so shaken her she had been always aware of the fact; still she had held on; but to oppose herself to the vicar—to shut her doors in the face of the man that he had gone in person to summon—she dared not. Had he taken the matter a little less for granted, she might have made a fight for it; but it was evident that he had treated her sister's wish as law, nor had it entered into his mind that anyone should not do the like. It was a thing she had not expected, and

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least of all from him. The suggestion of Dr. Gray that Mr. Harden had been admitted to see Mary in right of his sacred office was absolutely unfounded, as, indeed, his other charges—inexcusable even in the heat of passion—had been. Martha had acceded to the vicar's wish to see Mary, partly to show that she had no desire to isolate her from her friends, and partly, perhaps, because he had been George Waldron's rival. What influence he might have with her she had felt sure would have been antagonistic to him. But since it had turned out otherwise, there was nothing for it but to submit.

The doctor made her defeat as easy for her as he could. He, too, was not displeased at having escaped from a very unpleasant dilemma. He had "bragged" as high as he could afford, and higher, and his antagonist had outbragged him. But, indeed, for the unexpected interposition of his spiritual ally he must needs have been as good as his word, and given up a patient, only second in his heart to Hetty, to other hands. It would have been bad for

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her and bad for him. He was also conscious that, stung by the sense of having been made a tool of, and burning with indignation at Martha's conduct, he had said things to her he had no right to say. An apology for them was out of the question; and he was far too angry to contemplate an apology. He was not even sorry for what he had said, nor, it must be confessed, was he aware of the extent of his offence. On the rare occasions when a doctor does lose his temper, he is apt to make amends for the self-restraint he has to impose upon himself in dealing with the capricious, the hypochondriacal, and the malingerer.

"Well, I must see your sister," he said, in an indifferent tone, and walked off to his patient's room.

He found her on a couch in the sitting-room, which communicated with her bed-chamber. It was a lofty apartment, with a pleasant look-out on the garden at the back of the house. There were flowers in it and a few books she had brought with her, and a cheerful fire, beside which Susan, the little

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maid, was sitting, rolling her eyes, when they were not fixed with the fidelity of a spaniel upon her young mistress, upon the extent of her surroundings. Except the church, she had never beheld so huge a room before.

"Come, I am glad to see you on the sofa, my dear; that at least is a step in the right direction," said the doctor cheerfully. But he was not so satisfied as he looked. There was too bright a colour on the patient's cheek to please him, and the effort she made to welcome him brought on a fit of coughing, which prevented her reply.

"Parson called, please, sir," said Susan, in explanation of her mistress having left the bedroom.

"Oh, that was it, was it? Well, you trot off till I ring for you. A little tired, are we not?" he continued gently, drifting into that first person plural only used by doctors, editors, and kings. "We have been exciting ourselves, I fear."

She shook her head. "No; but I had not a very good night; I suppose I miss the lullaby of the sea," she said, with a faint smile.

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"Ah!" It struck him that was not all she missed. Had he been injudicious in permitting the transplanting of this delicate flower to a strange soil? The atmosphere of home was, after all, what best suited her, perhaps.

"She is worse" was the reflection that crossed his mind. He made his professional examination, which confirmed this view.

"So you have seen the vicar, Miss Mary?" he said, when that was over. "I was a little jealous when I heard of it. Rather an infringement upon my privileges. He treated you to none of his doldrums, I do hope; a good fellow, but in his calling what one calls an alarmist."

"He said nothing to alarm *me*—far from it."

"I am glad to hear it. You are a cup too low, my dear, already. I have been wrong—let me confess it; it is not often we doctors admit such a thing—in persuading you not to see your friends."

A faint flush came into Mary's face. "George is coming," she murmured.

"Well, of course—Doctor George. Let us hope

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he will do you good with his prescriptions. It was not through professional jealousy, I do assure you, that I kept *him* away from you."

"You did it for the best, I know; for *his* best, as well as for mine," she answered gently.

The doctor grew scarlet; was it possible she *did* know, as Hetty seemed to have known?

"Nay, I don't think I thought much about *him,*" he answered, smiling; "I was thinking of *you.*"

"Yes; you thought it would distress me."

The doctor nodded, and uttered a little sigh of relief.

"But now I see that you think differently. When a poor creature is untried, and there is yet a chance for him, we seclude him and give him prison fare; but when he is condemned, we admit his friends to see him, and let him have what he likes, since it doesn't matter."

"If that is a joke, my dear girl," said the doctor, with a frown on his brow, but with the tears very near his kind old eyes, "it is a very poor joke. As

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a matter of fact, there is no sort of parallel between the cases you mention."

"Well, well, you must not be angry with me, even if I prove you wrong, doctor," she answered, smiling. "But that is how it seems with me."

The doctor stood aghast. What Mary had said struck him as characteristic of Hetty rather than of herself. A change seemed to have taken place in her mental condition, only too consonant with that he perceived in her physical frame. It was not only one of evil augury, but most injurious to her—one of those forebodings which are apt to bring their own fulfilment. It grieved him beyond measure; he derived not the slightest satisfaction from the reflection that this had been, privately, his own view of her case.

"I will not argue with you, my dear," he answered mildly, "or even ask how such ideas can have entered your head. They are most deplorable, without foundation, and if I had not so high an opinion of you, I should call them wicked. If you

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are going to speak of them to Mr. Waldron, I must forbid him to see you."

"You need not fear, doctor. Do you think I would give him a moment's pain? You must not suppose I *wish* to die. I am not like the poor Queen of the May; 'for all these things,' she said, speaking of her love, you know, 'have ceased to be with my desire of life.' That is not my case; they stir my heartstrings still."

A blush came into her wan cheek as the scarlet petal is seen through some delicate flower, and as she hid her face in her hands the tears trickled through her thin fingers. The doctor filled a glass with some restorative and put it to her lips, but she gently waved it aside.

"I am myself again now," she said, in a firm voice; "it is the last weakness you shall ever see in me. Forgive me for the pain I have caused you; it was the penalty of your own kindness. One question, dear doctor, and I have done. It may be as you say, and as I am sure you hope, that all will go well with me; but there may be a different issue.

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In case of that, I wish to ask you, upon your honour, is it likely to be immediate, or will there be time given me to arrange such earthly matters as I have at heart? Do not deceive me, I entreat you."

She looked up at him with such a pleading face as would have melted a far colder heart than that which was beating fast in the good doctor's breast.

"You stand in no such peril as that you speak of, my dear girl, upon my honour," he answered with tender gravity. "The issues of life and death are not, I need not tell you, in human hands; but supposing, which Heaven forbid, that, that——"

"Yes, in that case," she put in with an encouraging smile.

"In that case, so far as my poor skill can judge, there is nothing sudden to be anticipated. On the contrary, I trust that, with change of air and scene —which I should otherwise not be contemplating, my dear, you see," he added with a show of triumph, "the symptoms which are now distressing you will disappear. If I do not speak at present of a second opinion, it is my vanity that prevents it,

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and because I flatter myself I can do as much for you as anybody; but as for time, if you continue in this unsatisfactory state, as the statute says, 'of malice,' you will find yourself condemned to the *peine forte et dure*, administered (with their stethoscopes) by half the doctors in the kingdom."

She fell into his way at once, and gently smiled as though this prospect were a charming one.

"You have made me quite happy in my mind, doctor," she murmured, with a smile of supreme content.

"It would do me more credit to see you well in your body, my dear," replied the doctor ruefully. He was by no means satisfied with himself as regarded the result of his interview; he felt that his patient had somehow got the better of him. It did not strike him that he was born to be deceived by young women; that Martha had hoodwinked him, that Hetty had cajoled him, and that another victory, more or less, over his simple and tender nature, was nothing to be surprised at. He thought he might

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have been firmer in opposing Mary's forebodings, and have prophesied smoother things to her. A gentleman in the same profession, in passing a eulogium upon Dr. Gray, had allowed that he was not ready enough in the matter of judicious lying, and the accusation was just. He never grudged a patient his time, but just now the distant clanging of the hall-bell, which announced a visitor, was quite a relief to him.

"That is Waldron," he said; "you have had excitement enough, and must promise me that he shall not remain with you beyond a quarter of an hour. I shall leave word with Susan to come back and take her place—well, in twenty minutes."

He met George in the corridor. "How is she?" inquired the young man anxiously.

"Much the same. Now, listen; only a quarter of an hour, or you'll make her worse, and mind you take cheerful news."

To judge by George's face, this hint was not a superfluous one. Though he eagerly desired to see Mary, the prospect of it alarmed him. He would

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rather have faced a loaded revolver than the sight of her he loved in pain; the idea of her being "in danger" had only occurred to him, from something the vicar had dropped, an hour ago, but it had already left its mark on him. Yesterday he had thought, with some distaste, of having to meet Martha after the unpleasantness of their last parting; but to-day it had not caused him a moment's uneasiness (as a matter of fact, he had not met her, but had, by her orders, been at once conducted to the invalid); his mind was monopolized by the thought of Mary's condition. To him, so strong and well, and unaccustomed to sickness, the interview before him, though so longed for, was full of dread. The sight of his darling, so thin and worn, sent a chill through his very heart, but her sweet smile of welcome reassured him. Instead of taking the chair which had been placed for him, he fell on his knees beside her, and covered the hand she held out to him with kisses.

"How are you, my darling?"

Never was that simple question freighted with

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more loving interest; never did ear more earnestly await the reply.

"Better—better already for the sight of you, dear; I have a cough; 'one of our lungs is not all we could wish,' says the doctor, as if it belonged to us both."

"Feverish?"

"No; that is *you*, sir. The doctor warned me that it would be so; and I promised to give you only twenty minutes. Do not let us waste it by talking of my complaints. How are your dear folks at home?"

"They are all rather miserable about you, of course."

"You mean about *you*."

"What is the difference? Am I not *you?*" answered the young man gently. "Their being forbidden to see you has been a sad disappointment."

"Forbidden?"

"So they imagined—it was by the doctor's orders, of course," he added, in answer to her distressed look. "That is all over now; they will come to you every day, and so shall I. How was it, by

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the way, that the veto was withdrawn, and that this great pleasure has been vouchsafed me?"

"It was through Mr. Harden."

"Indeed? He never told me so; but, for the news he brought me, I shall ever think him a good fellow."

"Do not think, but be sure of it. George dear, there should be no secrets between us. Let me tell you something. Though I never cared for the good vicar as he would have me do—it seems now that I never could have cared for anyone in that way save yourself—before you came home he wanted me to be his wife."

"Good heavens!" George frowned a little, and then he smiled a little disdainfully.

"You must not be angry with him on that account, George, and still less must you think of him with disrespect. A more noble heart does not beat even in your breast than in that of Æneas Harden. He is incapable of a meanness. My uncle and others were in his favour, but he never took advantage of it to press his suit. He never distressed

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me by importunity. To-day, when he called to see me, thinking perhaps I was a little stronger than I am, he spoke of you as if you had been his brother. I do not say that in the case of so good a man it gave him pain to do so, but it was generous of him."

"He must be a fine fellow," said George heartily.

"Moreover, when, moved by his kindly words, I said how I longed to see you, but that it was thought imprudent by my sister and the doctor, there came a light into his eyes such as I never thought to see there."

"Imprudent!" he cried; "they must be mad! What right have *I* here, when your door is closed against George Waldron? I don't care who has done it. It is abominable!"

"He said that, did he?" said George quietly, but his face grew grave.

"Well, he was so angry that, though his tone was as calm as usual, he seemed hardly to know what he said; but since it was for my sake—and still more for yours—I could not scold him. He

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was kindness itself to me, but the thought of our separation seemed to swallow up all other thoughts. 'It is cruel; it is infamous,' I heard him mutter. My belief is, he was putting himself in your place, and suffering for you, as it were by proxy."

"A generous heart, indeed!" exclaimed Waldron. "But how did he get your sis—I mean the doctor's permission?—though, indeed, Gray seemed amenable enough just now."

"I don't know; he simply promised that you should be with me in an hour, and here you are."

"Well, he deserves something at our hands. I was going to say he shall marry us, but perhaps, under the circumstances, that wouldn't quite do."

A look of pain flitted across Mary's face. "Do not talk of that just now; I want you always—*always* to remember how this loyal friend has acted, and to keep him near your heart, for my sake."

"Of course it will be so. There shall be no friend so welcome to our home as he. Speaking of marriage, though he is not very nearly associated with the subject, poor fellow! John sends you his

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kindest love. He leaves us to-morrow, when you must do your best to comfort Maggie."

"I will," said Mary softly, and into her face came that look of intense content again.

There was a knock at the door.

"Please, mum, it's the twenty minutes," cried discreet Susan through the panel.

Whereupon, with reluctant obedience, the young people murmured their "good-bye."

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. ROLFE IS "HURT."

"MISFORTUNES," it is said, "never come singly;" and even that other proverb, "It never rains but it pours," which would seem to be capable of a directly contrary meaning, has been pressed by the pessimists (who are growing very numerous) into the same service. But, as a matter of fact, Fortune is piebald —rarely either white or black. When we are in great adversity, small evils often become magnified;

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each seems the last straw that threatens to break the camel's back; and even such bright strokes of good luck as occur only intensify in despondent minds the general gloom. But with more wholesome natures, grateful for small mercies, these latter, which, after all, *do* come, are estimated beyond their value.

There was sorrow enough at The Crag, as we know, though the inmates bore it for George's sake as lightly as they could; and he, for theirs, concealed it as much as possible. John Dennet, too, was leaving them—a cause of regret to all, and to Maggie one of lamentation indeed; but by the post that morning had arrived good news for Hetty. It was so small a thing in itself that prosperous folk would have hardly noticed it. It is shocking to think that a guinea to some people looks like a thousand to others—that a prospect which to one pair of eyes has no attraction should to another be clothed in the hues of Paradise; but so it is.

The most ambitious effort which Hetty's paintbrush had ever essayed was accepted by one of the

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water-colour societies. It had not been bought, of course; but it was "hung." It was a picture of Hendon Jut, seen from the windows of The Crag. Her brother's adventure there had impressed her imagination very strongly, and she had portrayed it with unusual skill. There was no attempt to describe the storm, which, indeed, was wholly beyond her powers. Natchett Bay was depicted in sunshine; but the long line of breakers, in their white malice, below Hendon Head, was strikingly rendered, and gave its name—The Jut—to the picture. Every member of the family had something of congratulation to say to her.

"What pleases me most, mother," said Hetty herself, "is that you and Maggie will now have something pleasant to tell Mary."

George had brought back as reassuring an account of the invalid as truth permitted. Indeed, though her appearance had at first shocked him, he had been reassured till he left her presence. Her talk, though interrupted by fits of coughing, had been so little of herself and her ailments, she seemed

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so calm and cheerful, that his apprehensions had been for the time allayed; but these very indications, now he came to think over them, were the reverse of consolatory. The only reference he had made to their marriage—in connection with the vicar—had been, it was true, an unfortunate one; but he now remembered that she herself had abstained from alluding to it altogether. This reticence in his subsequent interviews with her she continued to maintain, and though he did not confess his fears even to himself, he feared—which was a bad sign indeed—to broach the subject.

On the other hand, the reports of his mother and Maggie were not unfavourable; they always found Mary "cheerful," nor even to one another did they as yet use that terrible synonym "resigned." They visited Mary daily, and Martha made no objections to their doing so. She received them without effusion, but with civility.

"It is not, in my opinion," she said, on the first occasion, "to my dear sister's advantage that she should at present be excited by visitors."

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"Visitors!" exclaimed Mrs. Waldron, with a little flush.

"Well, I mean friends, of course. Indeed, the dearer they are, the more likelihood, surely, will there be of their visits having a deleterious effect. But my views, which at one time were Dr. Gray's, though he has seen fit to change them, have been overruled, and I have nothing more to say on the subject."

The two ladies thoroughly understood their position; it was disagreeable in the highest degree. But though thus received, or, more commonly, not received by their hostess at all, they continued their visits, not only for George's sake, but for Mary's, who obviously derived an extreme pleasure from them. She was never tired of talking of their affairs, and derived, as they had foreseen, an immense satisfaction from the stroke of luck—a term, by-the-bye, she much objected to, as derogatory to artistic merit—that had befallen Hetty.

The doctor, when questioned about his patient at the Hall, was reserved; he would give no decided

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opinion. Some symptoms of the case he "confessed he did not like," but there were others that were encouraging. Among these latter he especially mentioned the interest Mary showed in other people's affairs. Persons who are leaving the world, or who think they are leaving it, do not much concern themselves with mundane matters. They have "other things" (by which, however, they generally mean themselves) "to think about." This was not Mary's way. She had made out a list of her poor friends in Natchett, and supplied to them, by help of the vicar, what each wanted most; and never was almoner so pleased with the blessings invoked upon his patroness. Martha neither approved nor disapproved of this. To give money away had never been one of the pleasures she had looked forward to from the possession of it; but there was no harm in Mary's doing so—in moderation.

One day, however, when Mr. Rolfe happened to be calling at the Hall, the butler brought him in a note, while he was talking with Miss Martha.

"What is that?" inquired the hostess.

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Some lawyers would have answered, "A private communication," and resumed their talk where it had left off; but Mr. Rolfe was not naturally very strong in the vertebræ, and, moreover, it did not seem to him that there was anything confidential in the communication.

"Miss Mary wishes to see me for five minutes before I go," he answered.

"To see *you,* Mr. Rolfe? What for?" continued the other.

Her tone was so sharp that it put him on his mettle.

"I can't say till I have seen her," he answered, and added to himself, "And I shall not tell you then unless I think fit."

They went on to speak of other matters; among them of that "Ten Pounds Reward" for the discovery of Mr. Adderly's murderer, which had actually been issued, and had had all the bad effect upon the public mind the lawyer had predicted. Another topic in which his client was much more interested was the balance—a very large one—that the squire

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had had at his banker's, and the best method of investing it. It was astonishing how keen a woman of business Miss Martha had become; it seemed to Mr. Rolfe that he was talking to the late proprietor of the Hall in petticoats. "She is as sharp," he said to himself, "and almost as hard as nails."

We all talk as if we were alive to the impression our tone and manner make on other people, but very few of us realize its importance. Miss Martha, backed by her new-found thousands, was very indifferent about it. Yet this careless habit has lost more kingdoms, wrecked more ministries, and changed more human lives than any mere isolated acts have done.

The interview between Mr. Rolfe and the invalid lasted considerably longer than the five minutes which had been assigned as its limit, and its conclusion was awaited by Miss Martha with extreme impatience. She had said to the lawyer, "I will see you after you have seen Mary; I should like to hear what you think of her;" but it was probable that she did not highly value Mr. Rolfe's medical diagnosis.

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There were not many things which, in the public opinion, the author of that "Ten Pounds Reward" would have stuck at in order to gain her ends, and I dare say it would have given her credit for listening at the keyhole of Mary's room; but, if so, it would have done her wrong. Such an act, moreover, was impossible, for faithful little Susan never quitted the antechamber which communicated with it. But as time went by Miss Martha left the drawing-room, whither Mr. Rolfe would have presumably returned, and paced the hall, through which he must needs take his departure, as though she suspected him of wishing to avoid her. There is little doubt that he did wish it. She was behaving all round, indeed, in so masterful (and yet foolish) a fashion that everbody wished that; but he had no intention of so doing. Directly he came upon her he knew what had been in her mind, and naturally resented it.

"You have had quite a long chat with Mary," she said, with a forced smile, as she led the way into the dead squire's study. "What on earth has it been all about?"

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She had apparently forgotten all about the "diagnosis."

"She only wished to consult me about some little matters of business," returned the lawyer, with suave indifference.

"Business!" echoed Miss Martha. "She is surely not in a state to be troubled with any matters of that kind."

"It was her own wish, as you are aware, my dear madam; but if you mean her mental condition, it is my duty to say that I never met with a person of clearer intelligence."

"Still, she is ill and weak—a condition, I need not tell you, especially liable to undue influence."

"There was certainly nothing of that kind at work with her. The directions I have received from her have been quite natural, I do assure you."

"Perhaps you are not so good a judge of that as I am. I do not seek to restrain her generous impulses, but I have a right, as her only relative, to see that her good nature is not imposed upon. She has already given large sums away, and has still

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more than fifty pounds in her possession. I suppose that has gone the same road."

"Do you think it decorous, madam—considering that Miss Mary stands in the same position to me as yourself—to inquire into these details between lawyer and client?"

"I think it perfectly right and reasonable, sir," she answered hotly.

"I will say, then—though I do not feel justified in saying it—that your sister's talk with me has been concerning certain benefactions that she wishes to make. Beyond that my lips are sealed."

"I am to understand, then, that you have not, for instance, been making her will?"

"Her *will!* Miss Martha, you astound me! Certainly not."

"I thought it possible, that's all. From your wonder at such a question, it is clear that you are not so good a judge of her mental condition—not, of course, as regards her intelligence; but of the influences at work with her—as I am. Of course, it is nothing to me how she may choose to leave her

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money, but it is a great deal to herself—a matter, however, which I cannot explain to you. What I must insist upon, if our business relations are to continue beyond to-day, is that, if you do perform this service for her, you will inform me of the fact."

"Do I understand you to say, madam," said the lawyer, with white lips, "that unless I promise to reveal to you the testamentary intentions of your sister (should she ask me to draw them up), you will take your affairs out of my hands?"

It is possible for a hen to be quite as angry as a Bengal tigress when her young are threatened, but there was something much more dangerous in the quiet little lawyer's demeanour, as he spoke those words, than ruffled feathers. Miss Martha perceived that she had gone too far.

"Good heavens! how can you suppose me capable of such a menace? All I ask—and again I say it is not on my own account—is, that if you perform such an office for my sister you will let me know that it has been done. By that time, of course,

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it will be too late for remedy. It will be a *fait accompli.* The knowledge of it will save wrangling where there should be nought but peace, and put an end to fruitless opposition. You will have possession of the document, no doubt; but even if not, I suppose you will hardly credit me with the intention of destroying it. What harm, therefore, can there be in saying such a thing exists?"

"I cannot say that the idea pleases me, Miss Martha," said the lawyer coldly, "since, however you put it, it will be in some sort a breach of confidence. I hope the opportunity of which you speak will not occur; however, if Miss Mary does entrust me with the task you speak of, I promise to let you know of it. There."

She had got her way, but by no means so smoothly as she had expected. It had been obtained with difficulty—had been granted as a favour, and that grudgingly. Nor was she without suspicion that she had thereby compromised herself in the lawyer's eyes—but that was a small matter.

With a stiff inclination of his head, Mr. Rolfe

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left the room and mounted his horse, which had long been standing in charge of a groom at the front door. As soon as he got clear of the grounds he broke into monologue. "Since the world was made and the law invented," he exclaimed, "was there ever such a woman as that woman? 'You don't suppose,' she said, 'that I would destroy the will.' It is not many weeks ago since she said the same thing of her uncle's will. Well, of course she wouldn't. People that talk of committing suicide never do it; but she is a most audacious creature. Never have I been spoken to in such a fashion by any client. She made a deliberate attempt to undermine my principles—the safeguard of an honourable profession. I am to tell her if I make her sister's will for her; oh, certainly!" And he winked and nodded at his horse, as if that animal also perceived a gap in the hedge—a way out of that little difficulty. "Then how mean she is! Why should she object to poor Miss Mary's benefactions? 'Had that fifty pounds gone the same way as the rest?' she wanted to know." Here the little lawyer laughed

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aloud. "That was a good one, that was. I can laugh now, and I very nearly did then. It is better even than Mr. Collins' joke, though it will not have so large a circulation. '"Ten Pounds Reward,"' he said; 'well, of course; she murdered him herself, bless you, and naturally is not anxious that the truth should be discovered.' Old Collins has the sharpest wit of any man upon the Bench; but a little caustic, just a little caustic."

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CHAPTER XV.

MARTHA'S GUEST.

After Mr. Rolfe's departure, Martha Vance remained in "the study," thinking of many things. She cared little for needlework and less for books, and was wont to remark (somewhat egotistically) that she was not one who tired of her own company. Most persons in her position would just now have been far from cheerful, but she was one of those enviable individuals who, having secured the substance of life, despise such shadows as friendship, love, genialities of all kinds, and the esteem of their fellow-creatures. This last, indeed, she had the greater contempt for, because she knew that their judgment, in at least one respect, and that an important one, was ill-founded. She had been accused of hardness to her sister; nay, as we know, even of speculating upon her decease. She felt

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that Mary's very death, should it occur, would be laid (nor would *this,* alas! be altogether an injustice) at her door; and yet, in truth, all that belonged to her of tenderness was concentrated upon Mary.

Nor, again, as will be soon seen, was she as yet the miser that the world was getting to believe her to be. She had very exaggerated notions of the value of wealth, and intensely resented the idea of its "going out of the family," but she had not at present fallen into that miserable condition wherein "blood and money"—as respects the pain of parting with them—are synonymous. She was only drifting that way. She had simply thought it not worth while to return to the drawing-room, but the mis-called "study," with its desks and drawers and furniture, all adapted for the despatch of business, was, in fact, much more appropriate to her frame of mind.

The evenings were drawing in, and it was already dusk, but she sat alone over the fireless grate, with no special sense of melancholy. If questioned, she would have replied, with perfect truth,

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that it was better than sitting in the old parlour at the Cottage with her sister, dependent upon another's unwilling bounty, a thousand times.

Presently the butler entered, to say that there was a woman at the front door who wished to see her.

"A woman? What sort of a woman?"

"She is a poor person, miss, but she says her business is urgent."

"Then let her state her business."

"That is what I did tell her, miss; she says it's about the Ten—the reward as has been offered about the late squire."

"Light these candles and show her in."

This was an order not at all expected by Mr. Perkins. The appearance of the visitor had not been such as to suggest to him her admittance to an audience, nor had he the least anticipated it would be granted; he would, indeed, have turned her from the door as a mere beggar-woman, but that he could not resist the temptation of seeing how his mistress would take the matter; for the

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interest in the servants' hall in that Ten Pounds reward was fully equal to any it had excited elsewhere, and the comments upon it even more frank and free.

By candle-light this late caller looks even less respectable than by twilight. She has a long ulster coat, which, in those days when men and women did not, as now, wear each other's garments, gave her a masculine appearance, which the crushed bonnet, from which her iron-gray hair escaped like ill-thatched hay, and her boots burst at the sides were far from redeeming. Her face was swollen and red; her eyes inflamed; her voice broken with privation, remorse, and excess. It was impossible to picture a time when such a being had been beautiful, slender, and sweet-toned; but yet, alas! there had been such a time.

"What brings you here?" inquired Martha sternly, when the butler had closed the door and left them together.

"Want!" was the cold rejoinder. "Can you look at me and doubt it?"

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She undid her ulster with one vehement movement of her hands; below it were rags and garments held together with pins and twine.

"These are my own clothes; the coat was lent me to hide them."

"Why do you come to me, woman? I never give to beggars."

"I am not here to beg; I come for my just dues, the ten pounds you owe me."

"What ten pounds?"

"The money you promised for the discovery of Mr. Adderly's murderer—if you call it murder. It was I who did it; I threw the vitriol in his face, and it seems he died of it."

"So *you* were the woman!"

Martha looked at her with curiosity, devoid of horror. Her mind had been a good deal exercised upon the question *who* had killed her uncle, and for what reason. The reason, by piecing together certain old scandals concerning him, and supplementing them with her own view of the man, she had vaguely guessed, nor did the loathsomeness of the

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outcast creature that stood before her, confessing to the crime, at all shake her faith in her statement. She did not associate Uncle Adderly with youth and beauty or attractiveness of any kind; the worse-looking his sometime charmer, the more likely, she thought in her contemptuous hate, she must have been to suit him.

"You want to be hanged, do you?" Martha continued harshly.

"I care nothing about that. I want the ten pounds you have promised. I have heard you called all sort of names, but never a liar."

The compliment, though a left-handed one, was not altogether displeasing to Martha, nor did the crime the other confessed to set her against her; the look of reckless despair, too, in the woman's face touched some tender chord within her; but the despair, as she reflected, might be assumed.

"You think, no doubt, that rather than have my family affairs brought before the public, and the memory of my uncle disgraced by your revelations——"

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"Not at all," interrupted the other vehemently; "you are not one to be blackmailed, I know, any more than *he* was. The worst thing that is said of you, to my mind, is that you are a chip from the same block; still, if you knew him well, you must needs have hated him as I do. Nothing would have given him a greater pleasure, were he alive, than to see me hanged; and that is a good reason (I said to myself) for his niece *not* wishing it."

"Then you dread the gallows, it seems."

"I do not," she answered passionately; "what is death to one who is dying already of starvation; who has not a friend in the world, nor one penny in her pocket; and who can still remember—when she can get no drink to drug her memory—when she was an innocent girl and had a mother?"

Martha was moved in spite of herself. Her heart, if in process of petrifaction, was not yet stone. There was nothing of softness, however, in either look or tone, as she replied:

"What else did you say to yourself before you thought of coming to me?"

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"I said to myself that the man who ruined me, body and soul, was this woman's uncle!"

"It is like enough; but I am not answerable for his crimes. What else?"

"I said to myself that but for me he would be still alive and *here;* that it is through me, and me alone, that this woman (that is *you*) became his heiress. Out of the thousands I have poured into her purse (I said) is it possible that she would grudge me the money to get home, from whence I came—America; and if she does, she must, at least, pay me the price of my own blood, the reward she has offered for the catching of me. I was set on that for a particular reason. It was ten pounds for which I wrote to your uncle in vain, to save me from beggary; it was ten pounds which he refused me in yonder garden; ten pounds out of his tens of thousands! And it cost him his life. Is it possible, I asked myself, that you, whom I have enriched, could be even more base than he?"

"Then you are not one of those who think ten pounds too small a reward to offer for the discovery

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of the person who killed Mr. Joseph Adderly?" inquired Miss Martha, with a strange look, and speaking for the first time softly, and almost familiarly.

"It was the very sum of all sums to suit him; when I read it on the wall I said to myself as much. I think it was that, more than anything else, which brought me here."

"You did quite right to come," said Martha approvingly. "You shall have food." Here she rang the bell. "Put on your ulster; sit yonder with your back to the door."

In obedience to his mistress's orders and conscious of her eye, which never suffered his to stray in the direction of her visitor, Mr. Perkins brought in a tray with meat and wine. Martha carved the one and poured out the other. Her guest ate and drank like a famished hound. Not till she had quite finished did Martha speak again.

"I have no questions to ask you of any kind," she said, in the quiet tone that was habitual to her; "not even your name. The less I know about you the better; but you shall have what you ask,

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and more. Ten pounds is useless to you to buy clothes to get to America, far less to live on till you can procure work."

She unlocked a drawer and took out some bank-notes, with gold and silver.

"Here are fifty pounds. Hush! no thanks; it was *his* money. Go," she said; and she pointed to the door. "I will let you out myself."

And she did so.

Not a syllable did the other say, but with an inclination of the head that spoke more of sullen obedience than of gratitude, she moved down the gravelled walk by the very tree where the squire had stood when he had threatened to set the dogs on her, and was lost in the autumn mist.

Martha watched her out of sight ere she closed the door. It never struck her that she had broken the law in assisting her late visitor to escape; but if it had done so, that circumstance would not have weighed a feather with her.

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CHAPTER XVI.

A JUDGE OF A PICTURE.

"WHY should one household be the abode of peace and love, and another of isolation and bitterness?" exclaimed the vicar, throwing up his hands with a despairing gesture, as the doctor and he paced the cliff-top together, conversing of some who were their neighbours by no means in a mere conventional sense, for both men took the greatest interest in them.

"That is one of those questions which lie more in your way of business than mine," was the dry rejoinder. "I suppose in one case you have in your mind there are compensations—that is, so far as Miss Martha's case is concerned."

"Yes, and in our dear invalid's too, though they are of a very different kind," said the vicar gently; "though she has a deep regard for her sister

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(which it is fair to say, too, is reciprocated) she belongs to the other house; she is linked by nature to the Waldrons."

"That is the only way in which she ever will be linked with them," said the doctor gravely.

"Pray, how can you say so, when you have yourself recommended her going to town and consulting Sir Gregory Browne?" inquired the other, stopping short in his walk, and looking with scared eyes into the doctor's face.

"Sir Gregory is our last card, and we have to play it. She will come back neither better nor worse, but only a little nearer to the end."

"Heaven help her!" moaned the vicar.

"Well, of course it will, if what you preach is true; but it will not be in this world, believe me."

"Poor Waldron! poor Waldron!" sighed the vicar.

The doctor laid his hand gently upon his shoulder.

"You are a good fellow, Harden. There are few men in your position who would be thinking of

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him. If a man cannot win the girl he loves for himself, he is generally not displeased to find that his successful rival has had no better fortune."

"That must be a poor kind of lover indeed," returned the other; "'he tasted love with half his mind, and never drank the inviolate spring,' who sets his wretched jealousy above the happiness of her he loves. If by giving Mary away to George at the altar with my own hand I could ensure that, I would do it though it broke my heart."

"What a waste of love and life is here!" replied the doctor sadly; "let us only hope there is not more of it to come."

"More of it! What do you mean? How *can* there be more of it?"

To the poor vicar it seemed just then that there was but one person in the world.

"Oh, no matter. It is a trouble that we need not meet half-way. What presses now is to keep Mary free from worry. I am certain her sister's interviews with her do no good, and yet it is so difficult to prevent them, for, as you say, I do be-

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lieve she loves her. She talks to Mary about business matters, as I gather. It is necessary, perhaps, but there need not be so much of it. Miss Martha would resent my interference above everything; but if *you* were to say a word to her? Would you mind?"

"Mind? Why should I mind?" answered the vicar with amazement.

"Then by all means do it," returned the doctor; then added to himself, "Poor Mary has two heroes for her lovers, for this one is as bold as the other. For my part, I would rather fight ten Sepoys than tackle Miss Martha for half-an-hour."

He was thinking, of course, of the last tussle he had had with her, which was now, however, weeks ago. Many incidents connected with Mary had taken place since then, and despite the main and melancholy fact that her case was growing more and more hopeless, some of them had been of a most pleasant kind.

George Waldron saw her every day, and though each interview wrung his heart, like another turn of

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the rack, with something too of its physical torture, he would not have missed seeing her for a kingdom, since the sight of him evidently afforded her exquisite pleasure. As for the material pain, it even gave him a sort of satisfaction, such as some deeply-afflicted persons feel in a bodily ailment; though, of course, he was careful to suppress any sign of it in her presence. One day he came with a more tender smile upon his face than usual.

"I am come to cross-examine you, my darling; there is someone at home who is charging you with the most shocking behaviour; and, though I hope it is not true, your accuser will not be satisfied without the assurance of your innocence from your own lips."

"What is it?" she answered brightly. "I don't think I have done anything very wrong for quite a long time."

"No, nor ever," he murmured. "Indeed, even if you were to plead 'guilty' to the charge in this case, you would not have done wrong in my eyes. Do you know anything of this letter which Hetty re-

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ceived this morning from the secretary of the Water Colour Society?"

She took it in her thin fingers and read it slowly—

"DEAR MADAM,

"I have the pleasure to inform you that your picture, 'The Jut,' has found a purchaser. It is a Mr. Ascham, of Tenbridge, in Yorkshire. He was evidently much struck with it, and, as you placed the matter unreservedly in my hands, I ventured to name twenty-five guineas (a good figure, I do assure you, for a work by an unknown hand) as the price of it. He gave me the amount at once, being content, he said, to wait for the work till our exhibition was closed; and I herewith beg to forward a cheque, less our usual commission upon the sale.

"Yours truly,

"ROBERT BRIGGS."

"Now, what have you got to say about that letter, my darling?—Hetty wishes me to ask," said

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George. "She doesn't believe in Mr. Ascham, of Tenbridge, Yorkshire."

"No more do I," replied Mary indignantly. "I think it's a shamefully low price. I would have given double the money for the picture, as you well know; and I thought it very unkind that I was not allowed to buy it. Apart from its merits, it had, of course, a particular interest for me. It is, however, out of Hetty's hands now, and I shall at once write to Mr. Briggs to ask what his client will take for his bargain. Do you suppose I would not rather have 'The Jut' hanging here instead of that 'Cromwell dissolving the Long Parliament' yonder?"

"Then I may really tell Hetty," said George, smiling, but not without a suspicious look in his eyes still, "that you know nothing about Mr. Ascham, of Tenbridge."

"You may tell her with perfect truth that until to-day I never so much as heard of him; and since, though a good judge of art, he is far from a liberal patron of it, so long as I can get 'The Jut' out of his hands, I never wish to hear of him again."

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"You have made me very happy, my darling, and, what is of more consequence, you will have made Hetty happy too. 'That is Mary!' she cried, directly she had read Mr. Brigg's letter. 'Nobody else could have given such a price for that picture.' And nothing we could say could shake her. I confess I was of her opinion, for though I had been as eager to possess the thing as yourself, and thought very highly of it, I doubted its attraction for a stranger's eye. It was distressing to me to hear her mother take the opposite view; she thinks her Hetty a genius (which is far from the dear girl's own opinion of herself), and I trembled lest her affection should have misled her in this matter."

"And what did Maggie say?"

"Maggie was a disbeliever like myself, but since the affair is settled in so satisfactory a manner, I may confide to you that she recommended that nothing should be said to you on the subject. 'If the sale is a *bonâ fide* one,' she said, 'well and good; if not, why expose dear Mary's loving deception, and take away from her so great a pleasure?'"

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"Good Maggie—true Maggie," murmured the sick girl fervently, "I thank you for that."

"Well, I really don't know about *true* Maggie," said George, smiling; "for it seems to me she was suggesting a little duplicity herself. But at all events Hetty would not hear of it. What she meant to do if you had confessed to being the purchaser I don't quite know, but she would never have been persuaded, I feel certain, to take the cheque."

"May I ask, merely as a matter of curiosity, why not?" inquired Mary.

"She said it would be taking money under false pretences; that it was not paid to merit, as it professed to be, but only from motives of affection."

"Well, she will have to take it now, even though I should be so fortunate as to become the possessor of the picture, so there is no more to be said about it. I only wish she could come and see it. I shall never look at 'The Jut' without thinking of her—I don't say 'and of you, George,'" she added, with inexpressible tenderness, "because you are never out of my thoughts."

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The result of this interview placed Hetty in the seventh heaven of happiness. Illness, inaction, irritation, were all for the time forgotten in the fact that she had proved herself of use. So far as she was concerned, and if only the prospects of her brother had not been clouded by "the shadow feared of man," she would have almost felt that life was something to be enjoyed. There was little in her satisfaction of that vanity which ordinarily swells the pleasure of such an event as had befallen her. She never suspected herself of being a great artist; she did not look forward to name and fame; her ambition had been alike modest and unselfish, the hope that she might become a help instead of a hindrance, a lightener of the domestic load, instead of its chief burden, and it was now gratified to the full.

To highly cultured persons such a view will no doubt seem poor and mean; to be "rapt in one's art," to talk of it in high-flown terms, to set it above all one's own belongings except one's self (who has been made more "precious" by it, but was not, perhaps, wholly ignored before), is a much nobler atti-

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tude; but then Hetty was intensely natural; her crippled form required certain irons and appliances, but in her character there was nothing artificial. Her feelings were easily aroused, but they took the direction of common-sense. The assurance George brought back with him that day from Mary filled her loving heart with gratitude and joy. Since health, that greatest of blessings, was denied alike to her and her loved one at the Hall, it seemed impossible that any better news should reach her ear. Yet better news was on its way. If sometimes we see no bounds to the malice of Fate, at others we are equally amazed at its fits of beneficence; the former we call Destiny, and the latter Providence.

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CHAPTER XVII.

A MARRIAGE PRESENT.

On the afternoon that followed Hetty's day of rejoicing, Maggie received a letter the superscription of which astonished her not a little, for it was in the handwriting of Mary Vance, from whom she had parted only a few hours ago. George was actually paying the invalid his daily visit when it was put into her hand, and she had seen Mary herself that morning. She took it unopened into the little drawing-room where her mother and sister were sitting.

"Look at it, Hetty," she said, "what *can* it mean?"

"The worst," said Hetty calmly, but with a face from which all calm had departed, "So far as I am concerned it is only a proper punishment, for in my happiness on my own account" (though here

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she did herself a grievous wrong) "I have been forgetting George's wretchedness; it is her good-bye."

"Hush, hush, Hetty!" said her mother, in tones nearer to those of reproof than she had ever used to her. "It is wrong to anticipate evil, especially when good has been so lately vouchsafed us. Why should so sad an idea enter your mind? We found dear Mary no worse than usual to-day; and is it like her to sadden your sister unnecessarily, when she knows she has trouble enough of her own to bear?"

"Let us hope I am wrong, dear mother," said Hetty, with unwonted humility; but even while she spoke, Maggie had opened the envelope and burst into tears.

"What *is* the matter?" cried the widow, after a long pause. "Maggie, darling, speak to us."

"It is a temptation," she exclaimed, "a temptation that must be resisted, doubtless" (there was less of vehemence, Hetty noted, on the last word than on the rest), "but it is hard to be so tried."

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She held out the letter, which, her sister's quick eyes noticed, had an enclosure in it. Then her mother read it to herself while the others kept silence.

"Mary's offer is indeed most generous," she murmured, half gratefully, half regretfully, "but, as you say, it is impossible to take advantage of it." Then added, in a whisper, "Heavens, what would Martha say, if she were to know of this?"

"Forgive my curiosity, Maggie," said Hetty in dry, almost harsh tones, "but I should like to know what it is impossible for you to accept because mamma says Martha Vance would disapprove of it! From all we know of that person, I should have thought that her disapproval of any course of action would be a distinct recommendation of it. May I see the letter?"

The widow wiped away some silent tears, placed the letter in Hetty's hand, and retired to the bay window; she had often thought over matters of moment there, while her attention had seemed to be absorbed by that glorious view of land and sea,

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with which they had no connection, but never one that moved her as this did. "Mary is cruel while meaning to be kind," she said to herself.

Hetty read the letter aloud in an unfaltering voice.

"My Dearest Maggie," it began.

"You and I have often talked together about our own affairs, and understand them and, I hope, one another thoroughly. Mine have altered—I was going to say for the better; and so indeed it may be every way if we could only think so, but it may pain dear George to say so. I want to say nothing in this letter save what will, I hope, give pleasure, for it is meant to be a congratulatory one. You have often told me, Maggie dear, when I was living at the Cottage and dependent upon my uncle's bounty, that if only John and yourself could see your way to a small income for three years to come you would not hesitate to marry; by that time something good for him, you thought (and I think so too), would surely happen, and the talents and

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diligence of the man you love would be recognised. I was a very safe depositary of such a confidence, for though, as you know, I had all the will in the world to help you, it seemed out of the quesion that I should ever have the power. You may well say this is a long preface to what must be now a small matter in your old friend's eyes, and, indeed, that is very true, for what I enclose is absolutely of no consequence to me in a material sense. What is a thousand pounds, or two or ten thousand, to me as I lie here now, and much less when I lie—as I must presently do—elsewhere? I could say more on that matter, but that it would pain you, and I only call your attention to it, because by putting yourself in my place you will understand that the being able to help those I love is just the one thing now that can give me pleasure. You will not deprive me of it, I know; nor yet think my gift valueless because it costs me nothing. Fortunately, I know exactly what you have need of, which is so important in giving a marriage present. Of the thousand pounds I send you, £100 is for your dear

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self to buy your trousseau, and perhaps some trinket that will remind you of me; the other £900 is for you and John to marry upon. If my wish has weight with you, this you will do at once. Though I cannot come to your wedding, I shall be there in spirit, wherever I am. The very thought of it this moment makes me happier than any other that can be realized; and dear George has nothing to do with this matter, which is solely one between you and me; it will please him, however, I know, which, to me, is itself a happiness. Do not write to me till your wedding-day is fixed, and fix it early, dear, for the sake of your loving "MARY."

Hetty read all this without a break in her voice, while her mother and sister were sobbing audibly. She took the cheque for £1,000 enclosed in the letter, and held it in an unfaltering hand.

"You may weep," she said, in cold, contemptuous tones, "but what can your hearts be made of that you propose to yourselves to decline this gift of a dying girl; to deny her the one pleasure that

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remains to her; to refuse her last wish because it offends your own paltry pride? Dear mother, pardon me, but it was you who said, 'What will Martha think if she comes to know of this?' Who is Martha that, having done more mischief than she can ever remedy, we should care what she thinks? Who is Martha—false, heartless, selfish, worthless Martha—that *anyone* should care? This is a gift from Heaven—for it is from an angel's hand—and you would reject it because of Martha Vance! What has Martha Vance to do with it? It is not her money, though I do not doubt she counted upon succeeding to it."

"Hush, hush, Hetty!"

"I say she does count on it. She is a miser, like her uncle before her. If Mary had become rich by other means, would you have refused this gift because *he* had objected to it; and where is the difference? Is John, too, not to be considered? Or, in your false pride, have you forgotten him?"

The vehemence of the speaker's indignation, contrasted as it was with her prostrate and fragile form, was amazing to witness.

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"Oh, Hetty, how can you use such words!" cried Maggie pleadingly. "Forgotten him, you say; when it is the thought of him that makes the temptation so hard to bear. If you were in my place and this gift were offered you——"

"I would take it," broke in the other; "I should think myself a coward and an ingrate not to take it. It would be a most cruel as well as a most selfish act."

"And yet, Hetty, it was but yesterday that you were for refusing Mr. Ascham's money, because you feared it came from Mary."

"That was a wholly different matter; if it had been so it would have been taking money under a false pretence. Thanks to you, my dear ones, and to George, I want nothing, *nothing;* but if Mary from her sick-bed—nay, her death-bed—had sent me anything which she knew I wanted, even had it cost her something (which here, as she truly says, is not the case), I would not have been so churlish as to say 'No.'"

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"There is certainly something in what dear Hetty says," murmured Mrs. Waldron.

Hetty had gauged her mother's feelings accurately enough. She had a great deal of what some folks call "false pride" and others "proper pride." The thought of being reproached as "grasping" or "self-seeking" by Martha was wormwood to her; she was even disturbed by the thought of what "the world" (about fourteen people at most) would say to her daughter's acceptance of so large a gift; but, on the other hand, what happiness would it not ensure to Maggie! How it would cut short those dreary years of waiting for her, and realize her fondest dreams!

"I will write to John," said Maggie irresolutely.

"To name the day," put in Hetty positively. "Is it possible that you can hesitate to oblige such a benefactress in so small a matter as a date?"

Maggie and her mother looked at each other doubtfully; the crippled little creature on the couch was too masterful for them.

The front door opened and closed.

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"There is George!" cried Maggie, in a tone of relief. "He is sure to do what is right. He shall decide for me."

"You coward!" cried Hetty contemptuously. "But *I* am not afraid even of George."

"Hullo, what is this?" exclaimed her brother, entering the room. "Another mutiny?"

"Worse," replied Hetty; "it is a civil war. Unless you cut me to pieces I mean to conquer. The slaughter will be frightful. I recommend Maggie and mother to leave the room."

They did not wait for a second hint, but scuttled away like rabbits into their burrow, which was, however, overhead—mamma's bedroom. Then George took his seat as usual by the couch, and Hetty put Mary's letter and enclosure into his hand.

"What an angel!" murmured George when he had perused it; then he sighed as over some act of virtue that has been performed in vain.

"What Maggie fears," said Hetty, "is that you should make some objection to her acceptance of the gift, upon your own account; that you might stand

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between her and happiness from an idea that it has been given for your sake, and not for Maggie's. Even if it were so, I should never suspect you of so selfish an act; but, as it happens, Mary has distinctly stated the contrary. It is her marriage present to Maggie; a very handsome one indeed, but that is only consonant with her nature; there is no sacrifice involved in it, and it gives her the purest pleasure."

George rose from his seat and paced the room with rapid strides. His frank and kindly face was troubled and overcast.

"Maggie has said something about my own behaviour towards Mary yesterday," continued Hetty, "in what she calls a parallel case. I need not point out to you that there is no similarity between them; but, on the other hand, it proves that I have some sensitiveness, and should not now be Mary's advocate were I not sure of her being in the right. You *have,* however, some objection in your mind, I see, George. Shall I tell you what it is?"

"Maggie once refused assistance from my own hand, Hetty," he returned evasively, "offered with

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the self-same object. Is it strange, therefore, that she should hesitate to accept it when——"

"'When it comes from a stranger?' you were about to say," she interrupted. "You ought to thank me for preventing you from finishing that sentence. For shame, George! Moreover, in the one case, Maggie would have been impoverishing her brother, and in the other she is only accepting something offered, not only out of the abundance of the heart, but of the purse. 'It costs me nothing,' says Mary. But you are not thinking of Mary. You did not answer my question just now, when I said, 'What is your objection?' But I can tell it you in two words: it is Martha Vance."

Over George Waldron's face there came an angry flush, such as Hetty had never seen there before; but she well knew that she was not the cause of it: it had been evoked by the thought of the person she had named. "You men, George," she went on gently, "are, I know, different from us women. With you it is not the temple that sanctifies the gold—though it assuredly does so in this case, for it is

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the offering of the purest love—but the gold itself that weighs with you; you will take anything from the hand of friendship—money's worth in any form —but not money. You will give it—I need not say that to you, of all men—but you will not take it. It is not only that 'to beg you are ashamed,' but you reject what is voluntarily offered you, partly from false pride, even partly from false shame; you say to yourself, 'What will people' (and such people!) 'say of me?' It is useless to argue the matter with one of your sex; I do not even remind you that the opinion of the person you now stand in fear of is as worthless as herself; what I wish you to remember is, that this is a gift from Mary to Maggie (as she herself has stated), and has nothing to do with you whatever. You can prevent Maggie from profiting by it; you can blight the promise that has so unexpectedly bloomed upon her poor leafless life, but you have no right to do it; nay, it will be a most grievous wrong."

"I will offer no objection," said George, with a sigh that was almost a groan.

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"That is not enough, dear brother; you know how she loves you (though not more than I who am causing you such sorrow). One frown of yours, whatever your words may be, would freeze them; you must approve of what she does."

George bowed his head over the couch and kissed her. "It shall be so, Hetty."

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CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. ROLFE AND HIS CLIENT.

"HETTY dear—Hetty darling," whispered Maggie, when the two sisters were alone together an hour or so after Hetty had "tackled" George, as she expressed it; "how did you do it? It has made me the happiest girl in the world, and John (for I have written to him) I do believe will be the happiest man in it; and dear mother already looks younger by ten years; and yet I am not satisfied, you see, but curious."

"Well, I used the same arguments I used to you, only George is a more sensible person, and they convinced him."

"Well, I am sure he was not *easily* convinced; mother and I were talking the matter over, while you and he were together here, and we both thought he would say 'No'; and I don't think you were very

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confident about it yourself, Hetty, though you looked as bold as brass."

"Thank you very much, dear, for the simile," said Hetty sweetly; "but the fact is, I simply looked as I felt, for the victory was assured beforehand. It is much better, of course, that George should have approved of your accepting the gift, but the result would have been the same in any case. If he had forbidden you to do so, I should have written to dear Mary, told her all the circumstances, and suggested that she should *leave* you the money; it would then have come later to you (though, alas, only too soon!), but you would have got it all the same. I am not strong, dear Maggie, but I am resolute."

Maggie stood aghast and amazed.

"Yes," Hetty went on, "that was my little plan; a very simple one, but which would certainly have succeeded. It would have been a matter of congratulation for everybody; a thousand pounds saved out of the fire of Martha's avarice."

"I wish you had got to see her to-morrow in-

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stead of mamma and me," murmured Maggie with a groan.

"I most sincerely wish I had; she took great pleasure, she says, in telling her uncle what she thought of him, but not so much as it would give me to tell her what I think of *her*. There are two kinds of rich people who are hateful to me: the one who see a friend in need, and assure him of their deepest sympathy, and when he dies of starvation strew his coffin with lilies of the valley; the other, in a more advanced state of moral putrefaction, are misers. Martha belongs to the latter class; she is a grasping miser. One need not mind *what* one says to a creature of that kind." And Hetty sighed like one who sees a great opportunity out of reach.

"Nevertheless, it is a terrible time for us all," sighed Maggie. "Though, thanks to Mary, and, indeed, I may say to you likewise, this great happiness has befallen me, her sad condition—and alas, poor George's!—will be as much on my mind as ever, till the worst has happened and all is over." Then suddenly she added, with anxious earnestness,

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"That *will* be the worst, Hetty, will it not? You apprehend no other misfortune?"

"What misfortune is there to apprehend?"

"Let us hope, let us pray, none, Hetty; but we don't like George's looks. If there were anything wrong, however, it could hardly have escaped your sharp eyes."

"I have seen nothing amiss with him; Heaven forbid that I ever should," answered Hetty fervently. "You have John to comfort you, but if George were to go, for me all's lost."

"There is mother."

"She would go, too; she would not survive him. I should be left the last here, alone in my living grave."

The despair in her large, soft eyes was terrible to witness.

"It was, no doubt, only a nervous fancy of ours," said Maggie consolingly.

"Fancy or not, since you have spoken of it, it will haunt me till I know its shape. What have you observed in George?"

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"He changes colour at the least emotion; just now, being greatly moved, he was livid. Did you observe nothing of this when you were talking with him?"

"I did not; my mind was too full of another matter; but I recall it now. Go on."

"John told me that when he has been walking with him George could not face the hills. He had to stop, and would press his hand over his heart as if in pain."

"How long has this been going on?"

"I think ever since that fatal day upon the 'Jut.' He overtaxed himself, or perhaps, without his knowing it, there was mischief brewing before. The trouble that has befallen him about dear Mary has doubtless aggravated the symptoms, if any disease exists, which, nevertheless, may not be the case, remember."

"What does Dr. Gray say?"

"Well, John did speak to him," said Maggie reluctantly. "He hopes and thinks that it may be only muscular; the muscles of the heart, and not the

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heart itself. But he has made no examination. Hetty, darling Hetty!"—for the invalid had fallen back upon her pillow, her eyes closed, her pale lips slightly moving—"it was selfish of me to tell you this." Hetty shook her head, as a lily shakes in the faint summer air. "But you are so wise and shrewd that I thought your counsel——"

"You did quite right, Maggie," the other interrupted; "it was only for a moment that I lost my courage. Say nothing to George. I can always get the truth out of the dear doctor—I thought that I had made us all so happy! What presumption! Storm and sunshine alike fulfil God's Word; but sometimes there seems so much of gloom—so little sunshine."

* * * * *

A few hours after this scene—a mere drawing-room drama—nay, a charade, but which had for its subject the "Enigma of Life"—was being enacted at The Crags, another, of a very different kind, was taking place at Natchett Hall.

Mr. Rolfe had called upon Miss Martha by ap-

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pointment on a matter of business; she took an interest in her pecuniary affairs scarcely less than had been exhibited by her late uncle, and flattered herself that she had his qualifications for managing them. Mr. Rolfe advised, and, in acceding to his proposals, she imagined she had originated them.

"Now about this two thousand pounds on deposit at the bank," she said; "you are still of opinion that the debentures we were talking about are the best investment?"

"I can think of no better, my dear madam; if you will give me your cheque, the thing is done."

"We are buying rather dear, are we not?" she continued hesitatingly.

"Why, yes; but the stock is likely to rise, and is as safe as the Bank of England."

"A thousand pounds seems a large sum," she sighed, as she drew the cheque, "to buy only £900."

"It is only 'seems,' however," replied the lawyer, smiling. "We must remember the dividends."

"That of course," said Martha, looking like Minerva, the very embodiment of financial wisdom.

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"Well, I suppose you will want to see Mary, though it is not, I am sorry to say, one of her good days."

"I am sorry for that, but it will be quite unnecessary to disturb her."

"But she must surely sign her cheque, as I have done. The same stock——"

"Miss Mary has already disposed of her thousand pounds," said the lawyer coldly.

"Disposed of it?" she echoed, in an astonished tone. "Do you mean invested it somewhere else?"

"Well, yes; as I told you before, Miss Martha, I am not at liberty to speak of one client's affairs to another. Moreover, upon this particular matter secrecy has been enjoined upon me."

"Secrecy? Something not to be told to her own sister? Mr. Rolfe, I am not a person to be played with."

She had certainly not the appearance of one about to join in any description of amusement, except perhaps football, under rules where kicking your adversary is permitted.

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"Nor am I, madam, if it comes to that," returned the lawyer boldly.

He knew on which side his bread was buttered (as Mr. Adderly would have said), but there were limits to his subserviency; at heart he was not a bad fellow, and Mary's gentle ways had won his heart; from a partisan Miss Martha had turned him into an antagonist. It must also be said that he thoroughly understood their mutual relations; and that there was one point at least where he had the whip-hand of her. "I am certainly not going to disgrace my profession," he added, "at your bidding."

She looked at him as if she would have liked to scalp as well as kill him; but she, too, remembered where his advantage lay.

"You promised to give me warning, sir, only the other day," she exclaimed, "if my sister should make a will."

"I know it well; but what has that to do with this subject unless you wish to remind me that I have already been guilty of a weakness?" he answered bitterly. "Since I promised, I will keep my

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word as to that matter, but beyond it I will not go. I will answer no questions about your sister's private affairs."

"It is quite unnecessary, sir; where poor Mary's thousand pounds is gone is doubtless into Mr. George Waldron's pocket. A pretty *investment,* truly!"

The lawyer answered nothing, but put on his gloves as a sign of departure. He was very well aware that Miss Martha would dispense with the ceremony of shaking hands with him.

His coolness alarmed her.

"Well, it is something to find you are a man of your word, Mr. Rolfe," she said, after a pause.

"So far, madam, be assured that I shall merit your approval, though not my own."

Of this remark she took no notice.

"Nothing has, I suppose, been discovered by the police," she said in an indifferent tone, "respecting the person who assaulted Mr. Adderly?"

"And killed him," added the lawyer drily; "nothing, madam—the amount of reward offered was scarcely likely to ensure any extraordinary exertions."

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She smiled coldly, as if that matter was no longer worth discussion.

"Since you do not see my sister to-day, you will not have another opportunity till she returns from town. I am taking her, to-morrow or the next day, to consult Sir Gregory Browne. On her return she will probably send for you."

Mr. Rolfe bowed stiffly and took his leave. His conscience reproached him for the promise he had given, and his indignation was great against the woman who had extorted it.

Miss Martha sat awhile deep in thought. Everyone, it seemed, was turning against her. She had not a friend in the world—that was comparatively a small matter; but what if that for which she had sacrificed friendship—her uncle's fortune; or at least that portion of it which, though not her own, ought *by rights* (so she thought of it) to become her own —should also be sacrificed? Thrown away, not into the gutter (that she could have borne more easily), but upon a needy and scheming family, or on one member of it, not needy, but still scheming.

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She had hated that man before, but she now regarded him with little short of loathing. Was the huge sum already given him to be only a foretaste of what the giver had it in her mind to bequeath him? Mr. Rolfe would tell her if it was to be so, but would it not then be too late?

"It is not of myself I am thinking," she cried aloud (but the Ear that heard her knew she lied), "it is of the cajolery which has been practised by these people upon my dear sister; she has had no power to resist their importunities; they have taken advantage of her weakness and devotion. She is not a responsible being. All my hints have been thrown away upon her; perhaps, in her weakened state, she has not even understood their meaning."

This was a bold touch, indeed; whatever Miss Martha might be accused of, it was not a disinclination for plain speaking.

"It has become necessary—it is, indeed, my bounden duty—to remonstrate with her, gently, tenderly, of course, but in a manner not to be misunderstood."

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With that she locked her desk, put the key in her pocket, and marched off to Mary's room.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WORD.

THERE was nothing of her purpose in Miss Martha's face when she entered her sister's chamber; she had recovered her usual equanimity, and wore the cheerful and tender smile that was appropriate to the sick-room and its tenant; it was, moreover, a genuine smile. She loved Mary more than anyone save herself, and had always done so; and it distressed her that it had become necessary to remonstrate with her, even though it was for her own good. The appearance of the invalid would have caused some people to give up the intention of remonstrance; but, as we know, Martha had a duty to fulfil.

Mary was still on her couch, and had not been yet relegated altogether to that bed she well knew

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would be her death-bed; but a great change had of late come over her. She looked almost transparent; her delicate cheeks had a colour too bright by far; her eyes were large and lustrous, and at the moment wet, like a flower bathed in dew. Her smile of welcome to her sister was radiant. It did not escape her visitor that as she entered the room, Mary thrust a letter she had been reading under her pillow. It had become not unusual with her so to do of late; she often read the letters George had written her when he was forbidden to see her; this might have been one of them, or a later one, thought Martha; the shameless acknowledgment of that thousand pounds.

She was assiduous in her visits, and they had met more than once that day, so there was no necessity for any introductory matter.

"Mr. Rolfe has just been here," she said, taking a seat by her sister's side.

The colour on Mary's cheeks broadened a little, growing fainter at the edges, like the circles in water made by a stone.

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"Why did he not come to see me?" she said reproachfully; "I like Mr. Rolfe."

"I am afraid that is because he lets you do anything you please, no matter how extravagant, without protest," answered Martha significantly.

"Extravagant! How can *I* do anything extravagant," smiled Mary, "when I can never spend half my income?"

"I am not speaking of expenditure, dear, except as regards its moral bearings; it is little, as you say, to you, and of course it is nothing to me if you choose to make ducks and drakes of your money."

"Ducks and drakes!"

"Well, it surely is something like it when you give away a thousand pounds at a time."

"Who told you I had done that? Not Mr. Rolfe, I do hope," said Mary earnestly.

"No. He respected your confidence, which it seems was reposed in him though denied to me; but when he came to-day about my investment of the deposit, he was obliged to confess that you had chosen another way of disposing of your portion.

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He did not say what way; but if it be as I suspect, you must permit me to say that it has my strong disapproval."

Mary laid her thin fingers, damp with weakness and emotion, on her sister's wrist. If Dr. Gray had been present he would have turned Martha out of the room, by the scruff of the neck if she could not be persuaded to go by gentler means: if she had not been so set on her purpose she would have herself perceived how utterly unequal the poor girl was to any argument, far less to any disagreement.

"Why do you disapprove?" she inquired in a whisper that was almost inaudible.

"Because, in one word, dear, it is not maidenly; it does not strike *you,* of course, in that light. It seems only natural and generous so to act, but the world will blame you for the gift, and he who has accepted it ought to be the last man in the world to countenance such a thing."

Mary put her hand under the pillow, and, after a piteous struggle that betrayed the weakness to which she was reduced, pulled out the letter she

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had been reading and placed it in her sister's hand without a word. Martha read it aloud.

"My dearest Mary," it began,—"I have decided, not, I must confess to you, without a severe struggle, to accept your noble gift." (Here Martha smiled a bitter smile. "Did you think she would refuse it, my dear?" she inquired contemptuously; but there was no reply.) "I do so, as you at least will understand, not less on my own account than upon yours; for I know my acceptance of it will afford you almost as great happiness as you have conferred upon myself. It is something so unlooked for, and so princely, that it seems to me at present like a fairy tale, hardly to be believed in. There is only one person in the world —yourself—who could have done it. Alas! how words fail me! But you will know how my heart thanks you. I could not (as you suggested) wait to write to you till I had heard from John, but I have obeyed you in the other matter. I have named the day to him for our marriage, the 19th of next month, and have no fear of any procrastination on his part. Without your magnificent aid, it would have been

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delayed indefinitely, and, perhaps, never come to pass at all. You have rendered possible what seemed out of the question, and made (as I believe) two persons happy for life. Still, it is only the certainty of its making *you* happy that causes me to say 'Yes.' Others—it is only to be expected—will regard my conduct with other eyes. A thousand thanks.

"Yours lovingly and gratefully,

"MAGGIE WALDRON."

"Well, I must confess that that is a great relief to my mind," was Martha's comment. "Our young friend is quite right in supposing that 'other eyes' will regard her conduct in an unfavourable light, but though an act—I will not say of misplaced, but of lavish generosity on your part—there is nothing discreditable in it, as I feared."

"What did you fear, Martha?"

"I feared that you had given it to George Waldron."

"And what if I had?"

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"In that case I should be compelled to apply to such a gift the term I used just now, unmaidenly. It would not have been decorous; it would have been contrary to the usages of society."

Mary smiled. Ill as she was, her sense of humour was faintly stirred by that last sentence. She could not forget the Ten Pounds reward offered by her sister, and the effect *that* had had upon society.

"We must agree to differ about that, Martha," she answered quietly.

"We will agree, at all events, not to argue the matter, my dear, since fortunately the case has not arisen."

"George would never, I fear, have taken money from my hand," said Mary; "but otherwise, I should have seen no harm in offering it him."

"Pardon me, but you would, I hope. The very fact of your knowing that he would have rejected it proves that I am right. He would never have allowed you to make such a mistake in morals. Did

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you ever hear of a man of honour taking advantage of his relation with a young woman in that way?"

"And yet there would be no harm in his accepting her money if it were bequeathed to him."

Martha's heart sank within her; this, then (as she had all along suspected), was what was in her sister's mind.

"I do not say there would be actual harm in it," she replied, "but have you ever heard of such a thing being done? Men have often left their money to the woman they were engaged to, but not women to men. As a woman yourself, you surely perceive the difference. It would certainly place any man—who was a gentleman—in a very unenviable position. I leave out of the question what the world would say of him; though to some minds—and I do him the merest justice in saying to that of George Waldron—its verdict would be intolerable."

"Martha dear," said Mary, after a long pause, "I am going to leave you half my fortune. Will not that be enough?"

"I don't know what you mean, Mary, by 'enough,'"

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she answered with severity. "I do not wish to speak of myself at all in connection with this matter. I am thinking of your reputation, not of my own aggrandizement."

"I say 'enough,'" continued Mary, without noticing this disclaimer, "because you have wealth even now far beyond your needs. When we were poor—oh those happy days, when we were poor, there were no disagreements between us then!—the little gifts I sent to Maggie on her birthday—a shell pincushion, a handscreen of dropped gulls' feathers, never caused these bitter words between us."

"I am not bitter now, I am speaking only for your good."

"Well, well," sighed the sick girl, "I will strive to believe it so. I say, even in those days we contrived, though with much self-sacrifice, or, as you called it, sordid care, to make both ends meet. What is it, then, that you can want *now?* Still, because I love you so, and you are the only relation I have in the world, I intend, as I have said, to leave

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you half of all I have. Will you be angry with me —will you think unkindly of me, if I leave the other half to one who needs it, not for himself, Heaven knows, but for others, my dearest friends?"

"Of course, I shall not be angry, Mary; nor shall I think of you hardly, but others will say—well, what I have already hinted at, both of you and him."

There was a long silence.

"Perhaps you are right," said Mary presently. "The objection to my intention, on which, however, I am fixed—it is the one thing which has supported me in these last hours of weakness—is the publicity of the act. If I leave no will, but trust you to dispose of my fortune according to the wish I have expressed to you, that will be the better plan. Whatever I say now—I am almost on my death-bed, Martha—will have, I know, with you, all the force of a last testament."

"I hope so, indeed, my dear," said Martha slowly, but not hesitatingly. Her tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of her mouth; she kept saying to

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herself, "Of course, of course, I shall do as she desires."

"Yes," continued Mary softly, "I will leave a letter for him, explaining why I made no will, and expressing my wishes, and you will give it him with your own hand when I am gone."

"I will do that," answered Martha earnestly, and to herself she added, "I will do that, of course; indeed, how could I do otherwise?"

"There are also some small matters, Martha, little to you and nothing to me, but I should like two hundred pounds to be given, in my name, to the good vicar for distribution among the poor, and my Bible to himself—he asked for it; a hundred pounds to dear Mrs. Waldron, and the same to Hetty, as a remembrance of my lasting love."

"Let me put that down," said Martha eagerly, producing her pocket-book and a pencil. "It is best to have a memorandum of these things, though I hope and trust there may be no occasion for them. I have the greatest faith in Sir Gregory."

Mary went on as if she had not spoken. "Fifty

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pounds to Dr. Gray and fifty pounds to our little Susan, though I know you will see she never comes to want. That is all, I think. Have you set them down?"

"Yes; all."

"No; not all," said Mary, who had been watching her sister with grave attention; "you have forgotten George."

Martha flushed to her forehead.

"I have omitted him, it is true, my dear; but how is it possible I could forget him? The others might escape my memory, but scarcely George."

"True; nevertheless, please to set him down; Mr. Rolfe will manage the details for you when you have explained them to him."

"Yes, yes, do not trouble yourself any more about business matters. You seem very weak today, darling."

She bent over the invalid with genuine affection.

"Don't you think it would be better, dearest, to let Sir Gregory come down to the Hall instead of your taking that long journey? As you have said,

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and very truly, money is of no consequence to us. Why not have him here?"

"No, I will go to town to-morrow, as arranged," said Mary decisively.

"As you please, my dear. The landau has been fitted up for you, and an invalid carriage retained at the station. We shall drive straight to the hotel, where the doctor will visit you the next day. Heaven grant that his great skill may yet avail us! Now you must have your sleep."

With a farewell kiss she left her, but Mary, though tired enough, lay with open eyes and thoughtful face long after she had gone. Presently she addressed the little maid, who, when Mary had no visitor, was in constant attendance on her.

"Susan, if somebody you loved very much indeed and who loved you had promised to make you a present, you would trust to his word, would you not, just as though he had set it down in writing? Supposing it was I, for instance, you would feel just as sure that I should give it you."

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"Oh yes, if it was you, Miss Mary, just as sure, but——"

"But what?"

"Well, miss, if it was anybody else — step-mother, for instance—if it was the same to them, I would rather have it writ down."

CHAPTER XX.

ALONE IN HER GLORY.

THE next day Mary went up to town with her sister and Susan. They remained there but three days, during which Martha never left her charge, save for a few hours. Sir Gregory came in due course, examined the patient, inquired into her symptoms, and shook his head at everything except his fee.

"You had better take your sister home at once while she is still able to travel," was the sum-total of his advice.

Mary returned accordingly, and, as Dr. Gray was compelled to acknowledge to himself, none too soon.

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His latest prescription, "Sir Gregory," had obviously failed.

George Waldron was the last to recognise the fact, and it was a terrible shock to him; he had no mind to attend to his own condition; but those about him perceived with alarm that something was seriously amiss with him. "Only muscular," still said Dr. Gray; but his tone, nevertheless, was graver than it had been when speaking of George. "This suspense" (alluding to that Damocles' sword that hung by such a slender hair by this time over Mary's head) "is undoubtedly very hurtful to him." He feared developments; but Mary clung to life till Maggie should be married, and opposed with piteous entreaties any postponement of that event. It took place, therefore, on the day appointed.

It would have seemed in old days impossible to Maggie that the sky of such a day of happiness could have worn a cloud; but it was overcast with the shadow thrown from Mary's sick-room. There, however, there was great sunshine.

"I have been so happy," murmured the girl into

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George's ear, "since—since that day we walked home together from The Jut. Do not weep for me: think of the happiness of your other dear ones."

To Mrs. Waldron she said earnestly, "When I am gone, all your troubles will cease."

The widow thought that she was referring to the anxiety the speaker's illness had caused them.

"We shall never, never forget you, dearest," she answered; "but we shall try not to grieve for you, for we shall know you will be in heaven."

Nevertheless it was a sad parting; Maggie visited her on the very morning of her marriage-day, and, as Mary had besought her, in her bridal dress.

"We are going away only for a day or two, dearest, and then we shall return to the Cottage, your own Cottage, which we have taken so as to be near you."

It was a loving thought, but superfluous, for before the bridal pair returned Mary had passed away. Her sister only was with her, dissolved in genuine tears, for in truth she loved her. Mary chose a certain chapter of the Bible to be read aloud to her,

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At the words "If riches increase, set not your heart upon them," she laid her fragile hand upon Martha's wrist and murmured. "Remember." It was her last word.

Martha was present at the funeral, draped in so thick a veil that her features were hardly recognisable. Her tearful eyes, however, sought for one person among the mournful throng with shrinking persistence. To her great relief he was not there. George Waldron had been taken seriously ill, and was unable to leave his bed.

The next day she despatched a letter to Mrs. Waldron, inquiring after her son's health in friendly terms.

"I take," she wrote, "this my first opportunity of conforming to my beloved sister's wishes. She desired me to send you, and to Hetty, 'with her lasting love,' the two enclosed cheques for a hundred pounds as a parting gift."

She also sent Mary's Bible, with two hundred pounds in trust for the poor, to the vicar, and fifty pounds to Dr. Gray. The latter sum she also gave

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to Susan, who was, however, too overcome with grief to welcome her good fortune. Never were the last wishes of the dead attended to with such affectionate promptness.

Mr. Rolfe, for one, was greatly astonished by it.

"I think," he said to himself, "that she has done it all so quickly, in order to put the temptation of keeping the money—which I am sure she felt—out of her reach." It was certain that Mary Vance had left no will, or he would have been aware of it. He was glad of it, since no betrayal of professional confidence, however slight, was now required of him. Somewhat to his surprise, he still continued Miss Martha's legal adviser. As she had now above one hundred thousand pounds of her own, this was a circumstance on which he might well be congratulated; while the fact that in her conversation with him she solely confined herself to business topics was by no means a source of regret. She never mentioned her sister's name to him, nor referred to the family at The Crag, between whom and herself all relations had dropped.

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She mixed, indeed, with no society whatever; half the rooms of the Hall were shut up; the late Mr. Adderly had been almost genial compared with his niece and sole heiress; she was becoming what Hetty had called her by anticipation, a miser; and her wealth grew apace.

To the Waldrons, on the other hand, fortune was not favourable. In their case there was no opportunity, of course, to learn "how money breeds," because they had none; and George's income, which had hitherto been their mainstay, had become endangered. It was doubtful whether his health would permit his returning to India and resuming his post upon the railway. He was no longer ill, but physical exertion of any kind was forbidden him.

Dr. Gray—who from time to time visited at the Hall professionally, for Miss Martha had (as Mrs. Maitland expressed it) become "as yellow as her guineas," and was often far from well—once, more by way of something to say than with the idea that the matter would have much interest for his patient, informed her of the young man's illness.

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"Our friend George Waldron, I am sorry to say, is in a bad way; a strange thing for one who, but a few months ago, looked the picture of health and strength."

"Indeed!" said Martha, by no means in an indifferent tone; "do you mean that he is dangerously ill?"

"No; though in his case one might almost say that would be preferable. To a man of action, such as he, the restraint that he is obliged to submit to will be, I fear, very galling. The hill up to your old Cottage, where the Dennets are still staying—for though I hear of some improvement in that way, there is still little work for John in town—has become quite a toil to George. He has to stop and rest half-way, poor fellow; and he used to run up it like a lamplighter."

"Something wrong with the heart, I suppose?" said Martha coldly.

"Yes" ("there is not likely to be anything wrong with *yours,*" was the doctor's reflection); "and illness

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in his case is not the worst of it; it may spell something like ruin."

"Indeed," said Martha, with her hard eyes upon the floor; "how so?"

"Well, it is probable he will have to throw up his appointment in India; it seems monstrous, considering his services in the Mutiny, that he should receive no pension; but he is a civilian, and will have to be dependent upon the generosity of the railway company. We know, too, what a mainstay he has been to his family, and that will now be all over."

"His family, however, are better off than they used to be," observed Martha drily.

"Well, yes, thanks to the generosity of your sister, Dennet and Maggie have been enabled to marry; and, but for this break-down of George's, not a happier couple is to be found in England. But as to Mrs. Waldron and her invalid daughter, two hundred pounds between them will not go very far. If poor Miss Mary had lived, things would have been very different, though, again, it is doubtful in Waldron's

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state—but there, she has at least been spared *that* trouble. I beg your pardon, you were going to say something which I have interrupted."

"No, nothing; only since you were going home, would you kindly leave this prescription at the chemist's?"

"There is something the matter with that woman besides her liver," mused the doctor, as he rode home. "Upon my life, there was a moment when I thought she was going to do something handsome for the Waldrons; if she knew as well as I do, that they would never have taken it, she would certainly have done it. And then again she became what she always is—as hard as a flint."

Even the Reverend Æneas Harden had had to come to this conclusion as regarded Miss Martha.

When he applied, as usual, at Christmastime, for some help for his people from the Hall, its mistress had expressed the greatest indignation.

"Did you not have two hundred pounds from me not a month ago?" she said.

"That money, of course, has not been spent," he

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returned quietly; "the major part has been retained for exigencies; but I understood that that had been the gift of your dear sister."

And, at the mention of her, the vicar's voice had sunk and his eyes grown dim.

"So it was, in a sense," argued Martha; "but, as you are well aware, she left no will, and there was nothing to compel me to carry out her wishes."

"Nothing to compel you?" he inquired, aghast.

"Certainly not, Mr. Harden; I might have kept the money, and that I should be mulcted afresh, after such an act of liberality, strikes me as most unreasonable."

By the manner in which she expressed these views, no less than by the views themselves, Miss Martha lost her last friend. When the vicar "washed his hands" of a parishioner, and especially a female one, her case was bad indeed. A person, however, who has a hundred thousand pounds of her own, as Martha reflected, does not want friends. She had been used to think, in her uncle's case, that there must be a certain unpleasantness, be a person ever

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so rich, in meeting the averted eye, and finding one's self one too many in whatever company one found one's self; but "sitting alone" (like the merman) "with her crown of gold, on her throne," she felt far above such paltry considerations.

What annoyed her, strange to say, were thoughts--mere thoughts. They intruded upon her, not only in her stately drawing-room (where the furniture, however, was swathed in brown holland lest it should suffer, not indeed from use but exposure), but even in the "study," as she pored over her book of books—which I need not say was her banker's book—or calculated the present value of her investments; the picture of a dying girl, with an earnest, yet half-doubting look in her sweet face, presented itself to her eyes with terrible persistence, and a voice—though it was but a whisper—importunately beset her ear, saying "Remember!" She would sometimes answer it, as though it were really spoken: "I have acted for the best; she was not"—it was observable that she never said "*you* were not;" she treated the matter in the abstract, and avoided

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(perhaps even shrank from) all personal allusion—"she was not in a fit frame of mind to exercise her judgment. I am sure that I was right." Sometimes she left the voice unanswered, because—though she never confessed it, *never*—she was not so sure.

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CHAPTER XXI.

THE WILL.

Six months had now elapsed since Mary Vance's death, but she was not forgotten. Her sister had shut up, amongst others, the rooms that had been occupied by the sick girl at the Hall, which charitable persons ascribed to her unwillingness to revive tender associations; others—especially those of the Hall servants, of whom she had made that contradiction in terms "a clean sweep"—assigned it to the stings of conscience. "She knowed as she had murdered Miss Mary," they said (alluding to her having permitted her to nurse the squire instead of coming herself), "and of course it was 'unked' for her to go into her room." They also suggested that it was quite possible she had burnt some will that had left them all handsome bequests.

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George Waldron, on the other hand, was far from avoiding the spot where the only woman he had ever loved lay buried. It was a pious pilgrimage he often took, but there was nothing morbid in his devotion to her memory. He kept a bold front for the world, and especially for the little household at The Crag, though his heart bled for them. He used to say that he had now two homes instead of one, for to John and Maggie at the Cottage no one could be so welcome. But he felt bitterly the change in his fortunes that prevented him from assisting either of them. The Indian Railway Company had settled a pension on him of two hundred pounds a year; no ungenerous provision considering that they were not over-prosperous, and that he had been in their service but a few years. Medical opinion was decisive against his attempting to resume his work; but so long as he took life easily, he was assured he was in no desperate condition.

To himself, personally, it would have mattered nothing if he had been; but there were his mother

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and Hetty to be considered, and for their sakes he was glad that he was to live on. If only he could have helped them, he would have been still a contented if not a happy man.

John was getting on a little better in his profession; there was every hope that by the time Mary's gift had come to an end the young couple would have enough to live on; but there was Hetty, not wanting (for she protested she had no wants), but missing so many luxuries he had hitherto provided for her, and his mother "cutting and contriving" to make both ends meet, in a manner to him pitiable to behold. Since he had grown up to manhood he had been ignorant of the ways of poverty, and it distressed him to witness them in her, since he could not keep it from her door. He could himself have lived upon a crust if they would have let him, but any rigid economy on his part (even in his tobacco) was instantly perceived, and gave them pain.

"I am the only luxury that mother and George indulge in," said Hetty, in one of her rare moments

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of bitterness to her sister; "an expensive item, and quite useless."

Maggie justly contended that the latter statement at least was not the fact; for indeed Hetty was still, as she had ever been, the light of the house; and after awhile the invalid calmed down. But the topic of money-matters was still continued between them.

"Don't you think, Hetty, that considering dear Mary's extreme generosity to me, and her kind thought of mother and yourself, that it is rather strange that she left no gift of any kind for dear George, even—though certainly that was not requisite—by way of remembrance; of course it was not necessary in any way (for she could not have anticipated his present position), but when one thinks of her devotion to him, and of her delight in giving, does it not rather astonish you that she sent him nothing?"

"It does not astonish me at all, my dear," returned Hetty drily, "since Martha was her almoner."

"But you surely don't think——?"

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"Thought is free, my dear," interrupted the other, "and considering all that you have mentioned, and that Martha hated George like poison, and is also a miser, I think that—well, what you are thinking is highly probable."

"Good Heavens! that Martha has kept back something?"

"Yes, I do."

"Some gift? Why should she?"

"Why, indeed? If it was a pencil-case—provided it was not a gold one—she might have given it to him, but my conviction is that it was a very large sum of money."

"Oh, Hetty, how dreadful!"

"Dreadful to us, but not at all dreadful to her. We know how violently she was opposed to your getting Mary's thousand pounds; yet she gave up a hundred to mother and another hundred to me (whom I am proud to say she hates) without a murmur. She had some conscience then (it's all gone now), and that she did to salve it. Yes; she kept George's money. Do you remember that dear

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Mary said to mother, 'When I am gone all your troubles will cease?'"

"I thought that referred to her anxiety about Mary herself."

"Mary never thought of herself; she was alluding to mother's money troubles, which she knew would vanish if George had the power to make them do so."

"Do you think that dear George has any inkling of this?"

"Certainly not. Like Mary, he never thinks of himself; and when he thinks of her can imagine nothing that she has either done, or left undone, as being otherwise than right and natural. I think so, too; and in this matter I am therefore persuaded that what seems strange in her conduct has been the work of another. Mary trusted her sister, and Martha deceived her; that is my conviction."

"Months ago," said Maggie, musing, "dear John almost made me angry, by suggesting that Martha Vance could be guilty, not indeed of a breach of

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trust, but of conduct almost as abominable. It is possible he did not misjudge her after all."

"Well, of course not; we all know how clever dear John is; though, as regards Martha, no doubt his professional acquaintance with the criminal classes helped him, as Dr. Gray would say, to his diagnosis. However, there is no use discussing the matter, which can only after all be one of conjecture. The thing is over. There's the post."

"What a big envelope has come for George!" cried Maggie. "Let us hope the Government has taken his services into consideration after all. But, alas! there is no O.H.M.S. on it."

"No; it looks much more like a lawyer's letter. A lawsuit would crown his misfortunes."

"How can you be such a pessimist, Hetty? and even if it were so, John would defend it."

"If I had the spirits I used to have," sighed Hetty, "I should say, 'Who is the pessimist now?'" She had turned her face to the window. "But here comes the dear fellow."

"What, John!" exclaimed Maggie delightedly.

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Hetty smiled bitterly. It was only natural that John should now have the first place in her sister's thoughts; but somehow she resented it.

"Both of them," she answered.

"There is a letter for you, George," she said, as the two men entered the room, "which looks legal."

As George glanced at it with indifferent eyes, John looked over his shoulder at the superscription.

"By Jove, it *is* legal!" he exclaimed. "It has old Courtenay's signature in the corner. I wish it was for me instead of you."

"You are quite welcome to it," said George; nevertheless he opened it, and then sank back into a chair, with a livid face.

In five seconds Maggie had left the room and returned with a glass of brandy, a prescription Dr. Gray had always ordered to be at hand for George. He drank it, but it was some minutes before he became himself again. It was not to be wondered at, for his eyes had fallen upon Mary's

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handwriting; it was a letter to him, written, as it seemed, from the tomb.

"My darling George,

"If, as I trust will be the case, dear Martha has carried out my last wishes in respect to you, there will be no need for the document enclosed; in that case, I pray you, burn it. Let her never know that I doubted her solemn promise made to me on my deathbed. But a doubt, I confess, did cross me, which, if unfounded, should shame me in my grave. Sometimes it seemed to me that the temptation of great wealth might prove too much for her, and that she might deprive me of the most exquisite pleasure that wealth can give. To you too it will be a pleasure of the same kind, for it will enable you to benefit your dear ones—dear, too, to me next to your own dear self. When I was in town, I, in Martha's absence, sent for Mr. Courtenay, and made my will. He had my written instructions (as he will tell you) to retain it with this letter for six months before forwarding it to

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you. By that time there will be no excuse (I am writing, as it were, from the grave, darling, and my wishes will, I know, be respected by *you*) for delay, and Martha's intention (alas, that I should have to write it!) must have been to wrong you. Even if it be so, I need not say to you, 'Spare her all public shame,' but do not wrong yourself. She will have half my fortune still, and she needs none of it. The other half is yours, my darling, or rather, so much of it yours as your generosity will permit you to keep. I know whither it will go, and envy you the giving of it. Farewell, farewell, in death as in life.

"Your ever loving

"MARY."

There was a note from the lawyer explaining under what circumstances he had drawn the will (with no allusion to Martha Vance whatever), and the document itself, which was of the shortest. Mary left £25,000 to George Waldron absolutely, and the remainder of her fortune to her sister.

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George read this to himself, while the others kept silence, in amazed expectation; then—

"Maggie, call your mother," said he, in a gentle voice.

When the widow appeared, which she did immediately—for of the tenants of The Crag it might well have been written, "Of all beloveds, none stood farther than the door," so tiny was its size—he addressed her with deep emotion:

"Something has happened, dearest mother, that concerns us all, but which I could not reveal in your absence; I have had a letter written by my darling Mary, during her last illness, and relating something of great importance; I cannot trust myself to read it aloud—John will read it."

John Dennet did as he was bid, accomplishing his task with much tenderness and feeling, but also with professional distinctness; the story of misplaced trust and fraudful greed was made clear to every hearer.

Maggie glanced at Hetty with eyes that said, "Why, this was the very thing that you suspected!"

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but Hetty placed her finger on her lip. She was not one to boast of her foresight, and, indeed, would never take credit for any in this particular case.

"I was right about Martha, of course," she was wont to say; "but I should never have suspected Mary of such courage and conduct as she exhibited; to make a will, notwithstanding the other's promise to carry her wishes into effect, would have always seemed to me beyond her."

Hetty had other reasons for silence; her opinion of Martha was fixed enough, but just at present it was injudicious to express it. She thought it not impossible that a mistaken view of what was right might dissuade George from accepting Mary's legacy, and she reserved herself for such a contingency. This did not, however, come to pass, though the thought of Martha's baseness had much less influence with George than that of the wrong done to Mary.

Mrs. Waldron, indeed, said something—for her, severe—about the cruel fraud that had been practised on the dying girl.

"Morally speaking," observed John, "no doubt

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it is so; but legally, I doubt whether she could be punished for it. It was not as if she had a guilty knowledge of the existence of the will."

"Who could think of punishing her," exclaimed George, "when dear Mary says, 'Spare her'?"

"So long as Mary's wishes are obeyed throughout, that is a matter of course," returned John drily.

"They will be obeyed to the very letter," answered George sternly.

Nevertheless, as was afterwards remarked by Hetty, it was fortunate perhaps that Mary had said, "Spare her all public shame" instead of merely "Spare her"; for to have to give up this huge ill-gotten sum would in itself be a severe punishment to her, and George, in his conscientious obedience to her sister's wishes, might have spared her even that.

He could not be persuaded to address himself to Martha, even by letter, so John Dennet wrote for him, explaining in the stiffest terms, but without comment, exactly what had happened, and recommending her, for her own sake, to consult Mr. Rolfe at once as to what should be done.

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And Martha took the advice. The lawyer had had some queer scenes with his client at the Hall, but this one capped them all. She gave him John Dennet's communication, with the copies of Mary's and Mr. Courtenay's letters, and of the will, which had accompanied it.

"It is a very strange story," he observed, when he had read them.

"We need not go into that," she replied coldly. "The money must be paid, I suppose."

"But at least I must see the will," objected Mr. Rolfe.

"You have probably already done so," she answered bitterly. "It was drawn up by your own partner."

"That may be, madam," he answered stiffly, "but I knew nothing of it. If I had known of its existence, I should have done my duty, and compelled you to do yours."

"Let us have no words about it; I dispute nothing. Pay this man his money."

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"With five per cent. interest for the six months during which it has been morally owing."

"Is that necessary?" she groaned. She had screwed her courage up to the sticking place, so far as the giving up the legacy was concerned, but here was another turn of the screw.

"I don't know about the necessity, madam, but I strongly recommend that course. I need hardly say that you are being treated with great consideration, and it would be most injudicious to give any ground for cavil."

So the will was proved, and the legacy paid with that addition. It was given out that the document had been found, accidentally, six months after date.

As Mary had foreseen, Mrs. Waldron's troubles henceforth ceased. There was enough and to spare for all the dear ones at The Crag and the Cottage, though in the latter case this was soon rendered unnecessary by the improvement in John's professional prospects.

Where the necessity for pinching and saving

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now arose, it seemed, was at the Hall. After that huge lump had been extracted from Miss Martha's fortune, the need for economy became urgent indeed. She even dismissed Susan (who was at once taken into service by the Dennets), and confined her establishment to one "general servant," or, in other words, a charwoman, in the person of Sarah Jones, whose mission at the Spa had been terminated through lack of drinkers. This lady, with her mistress, occupied four rooms at the Hall, the rest of the mansion being permanently closed.

It was known far and wide as the residence of "Miser Martha," who thus obtained a certain position in the county after all, and at a cheap rate.

George Waldron enjoyed another sort of reputation. He was beloved by all who knew him, and found his happiness in that of others. At home he was known as "Uncle George," a title conferred upon him, of course, by a new generation, but adopted by their elders.

In his room hangs the picture of "The Jut," forwarded to him, according to Mary's direction, by

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the secretary of the Art Exhibition, when the season was over. She had not lived to see it, or to speak of it; but perhaps Mr. Rolfe knew more about Mr. Ascham of Tenbridge, who had parted with that bargain so readily, than he was inclined to tell. At all events, Hetty never knew anything of the original purchaser; she was never so successful with her pictures afterwards; but there was no longer the need for success, and she had drunk far too deeply of the waters of bitterness for such disappointments to trouble her. Her freedom from the pinch of poverty, and the sense of being no longer a burden to those she loved, filled her with content and gratitude. Dr. Gray saw more to admire in his favourite patient than ever.

Among all George Waldron's friends outside the walls of home the vicar was the chief. The bond that united them was not of this world; but it was strong as it was tender—the memory of the woman whom both had loved.

THE END.

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